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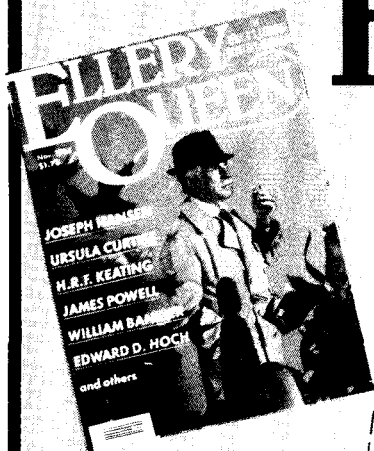


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SUMMER 1985  
ANTHOLOGY #52

**ELLERY  
QUEEN'S  
MORE  
LOST LADIES  
AND MEN**

Edited by Eleanor Sullivan

Stories collected from issues  
of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*  
edited by Ellery Queen

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## INTRODUCTION

"I have known a vast quantity of nonsense talked about bad men not looking you in the face. Don't trust that conventional idea. Dishonesty will stare honesty out of countenance any day in the week if there is something to be got by it." (Charles Dickens, "Hunted Down")

"Policemen are very realistic. It's difficult to speak to them about feelings and fancies." (Ellen Arthur, "The Scene of the Crime")

"As far as I am concerned there is just one perfect weapon—an automobile in good working order. Why? Because when an automobile is going fast enough it will kill anyone it hits. And if the driver gets out and looks sorry he'll find that he's the one getting everybody's sympathy and not the bothersome corpse on the ground who shouldn't have been in the way anyhow." (Stanley Ellin, "Broker's Special")

"Even if we'd had one or two leggy blondes of our own she might have been less obtrusive. But I doubt it. It wasn't the fairness or the length of her, or the sea-blue eyes or the straight, wide stare and the open smile that made her dynamite. It was something inside that wore all these as a dress . . . a timebomb, that was Kirsten. At first we never even noticed the clock ticking. But before Christmas we all knew, and we were all waiting for the explosion." (Ellis Peters, "Maiden Garland")

This companion volume to the earlier Ellery Queen anthologies, *Lost Ladies* and *Lost Men*, focus on wicked, wayward, wonderful women and men who have gone missing or worse. Perhaps through reading about them, some of us will find ourselves. All the stories, with the exception of Ellis Peters' "Maiden Garland" (which is from Macmillan's *Winter's Crimes* 1), were chosen from back issues of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

# Roy Vickers

## Wife Missing

The murder of Marion Pinnaker ("Mrs. Pin" in the headlines) was a popular mystery, though the Press hated it. Time was an active factor—the mystery grew more mysterious every week merely because the week had passed. After the first fine flare-up, the papers could neither feed it nor kill it.

The mystery had the added charm of simplicity. There was only one popular suspect—her husband. After a preliminary examination, however, the police showed exasperatingly little interest in him. He had the means and the opportunity and it was simple enough to equip him with most of the traditional motives. His peccadillos could easily be viewed as depravities. On the other hand, his virtues made it easy to see him as the unfortunate victim of slander.

The Pinnakers lived in a detached, six-room house with garden and garage—named Hillfoot, by grace of a modest slope—in the dormitory suburb of Honshom, which is thirty-two miles out of London. Nearly all the houses are of the same kind and so are the residents—that is, they present a united front of respectability, neighborliness, and adequacy of income.

In such a neighborhood people tend to know each other's affairs, as well as each other's movements. No one had seen Marion leave home at a relevant time. Within forty-eight hours there were whispers that she had not left the house at all and would shortly be found under the floorboards.

Tom Pinnaker, armed with a degree in commerce, had entered Bettinson's to begin at the bottom. In the furniture department he learned upholstery; in the catering department he acquired knowledge of wines and cold storage. He was in a straight line for managerial rank when his father died and he took over a small but steady house agency in central London specializing in the renting of small office suites.

The Pinnakers were a little better off than most of their neighbors because, in the second year of their marriage, Marion inherited twenty thousand pounds. She had placed half with her husband for investment. Although this money loomed large in the case there



was never anything wrong with Tom Pinnaker's account books. His losses were due strictly to bungling.

The legacy had come as a surprise—at least to Tom. It had been a marriage of mutual attraction—which is itself a bit of a mystery because their temperaments were so different. Marion was no glamor girl, to stampede a man's judgment. Among the millions who saw her photograph on television, opinion seemed to be divided—which means that she was attractive to some and not to others. Her face suggested a grave young woman who could be gay, but with the gaiety of a family gathering. A domesticated woman, one would say—remembering that domesticity is highly esteemed by many men.

Pinnaker loved his home. He also loved his wife, in his fashion, and was proud of her rigid code of morals: after five years of marriage he would not have changed her for any other kind of woman. Not that he despised all the other kinds. One's character, he told himself, had many facets. There was the facet that had enjoyed fun and games with a business girl in London—doing no harm, he convinced himself, to anybody. And at Honshom there had been—and still was—Freda Culham.

Except for occasional nights in London and sometimes a weekend—attributed to the social demands of clients—his habits were regular: he would never leave home earlier than nine, nor return earlier than six-thirty.

Routine was broken on the afternoon of Tuesday, January 5, 1954, when he arrived home a few minutes before three. The official police "narrative" begins with his entering his house at three. But we can profitably go back one hour—to two o'clock, when Mrs. Harker, the domestic help, entered the sitting room to report that she had finished her work and was going home.

Mrs. Pinnaker, she said, was not "dressed"—meaning that she was wearing an overall over skirt and jumper, and house shoes. She was sitting at the writing table handling "funny-looking papers" (which turned out to be Bearer Bonds) which she was placing one by one in a small attaché case.

Mrs. Harker was conscientiously rude to anyone in a higher income bracket than her own. When she eventually appeared on television she snapped and snarled at the interviewer, expressed her feelings freely without regard to her briefing, and was a huge popular success. She had a deep regard for Marion.

"You only picked at that grilled sole and I know it was done just

as you like it," she grumbled. "To say nothing of the veal cutlets yesterday! And you're thinner than looks healthy. It's not my business, dear, but why don't you see a doctor?"

"There's nothing wrong with me, Mrs. Harker." Marion rarely used first names and never called anybody "dear." "I've been advised to—well, to take a sort of holiday."

"Good advice, too! Take it. I'll manage here all right." She noticed a sealed envelope on the television set. "D'you want that letter posted?"

"No, thanks. It's—"

"Then, if there's nothing else, I'll be off."

"Just a minute, Mrs. Harker." From a drawer in the writing table Marion took out a small jeweler's case, opened it, and displayed a diamond brooch. "On your daughter's wedding day—next Saturday, isn't it?—I want you to give her this. That is, if you think she'd like it."

Mrs. Harker protested at the munificence of the gift.

"Don't think about it like that. But if you feel you must, just remind yourself that you've done much more for us than you were paid for. And now you must hurry or you'll miss your bus."

That incident could be interpreted as a kind of farewell; but the important point is that the bus touched its stopping point on schedule, at two-twelve, and that Mrs. Harker caught it.

A few minutes later Freda Culham turned up. Instead of leaving her car on the street, as would be usual, she drove up to the garage. A postman happened to notice the car—satisfactorily identified—standing between the kitchen door and the garage, within five minutes of half past two.

Freda provided a triangle motive for those who felt that the mystery would be incomplete without it—though there is evidence that Tom Pinnaker had no ambition to make Freda his wife. She was the daughter of a professor and the widow of a test pilot who, between them, had left her enough to live by herself in her own house in Honslom. A lively brunette in her middle twenties, with no occupation.

She records that she came in a friendly spirit to admit that she had fallen in love with Tom Pinnaker, to apologize for causing any possible scandal, and to express the hope that she had not given Marion any pain. She may have dressed it up like that, but it is unlikely. She was untroubled with anything resembling a social conscience. To her, marriage meant little more than a formal an-

nouncement that you intended to live with somebody until further notice.

The conversation took place in the hall, both women standing. Freda towered over Marion but otherwise was at a disadvantage. Indeed, her friendliness, if any, was wasted on Mrs. Pinnaker.

"I think, Mrs. Culham, you are about to suggest that my husband and I arrange a divorce. I am sorry that I cannot agree. For reasons which you would not appreciate I would in no circumstances whatever divorce my husband."

There were arguments by Freda, unanswered by Marion, but our present concern is that Freda had left the house before Tom Pinnaker arrived at three o'clock.

His account of his movements on entering the house has an unusual crispness. He did not claim a mental "blackout" nor any clouding of memory. He said that he entered the house by the kitchen door, shouted that he had come home. Receiving no answer, he went into the sitting room where his eye was caught by an envelope, propped up on the television set. It was addressed *Tom*, in Marion's handwriting. This made him quite certain that Marion had left him. He put the note, unopened, in his pocket. This was not absent-mindedness. He was positive, he said, that he knew the substance of what his wife had written.

At ten past three he was speaking on the telephone to his bank manager in London. That morning he had asked for the loan of one thousand pounds, promising that his wife would provide the necessary collateral.

"Infernal luck—my wife has been called away to a sick relation. I want you to ring James Roden, manager of the branch here. He's secretary of our tennis club and a personal friend—he will confirm my statement to you that my wife has securities of her own to the value of at least ten thousand pounds. Deposited with him."

At three-forty the local bank manager, Roden, rang Hillfoot. He first asked for Marion, and was told about the sick relation.

"Look, Pin. I've just had a call from your branch in London. I'm sorry, but I can't help at all."

"That's all right, Jim. I know you can't talk about clients' affairs. But you did not deny that you hold securities of Marion's?"

"I did deny it—I had to! Marion closed her account here yesterday."

These two conversations on the telephone were much quoted as indicating that Pinnaker must have been telling the truth when he asserted that Marion had left the house before three. But those who

preferred the Floorboards Theory suggested that, as soon as he came in, he asked her to provide the collateral, that when she refused he lost his temper and killed her, probably without intending to, and that the telephone talks were merely a clever blind.

When Mrs. Harker brought his breakfast tray on the following morning she ignored his greeting and glared at him.

"Is she coming back today?"

"If you mean Mrs. Pinnaker—no. I expect her to be away for at least a fortnight." He sat down and opened the newspaper. "You might get her room done this morning, then we can lock it up until she comes back."

"And another thing, sir. You let the furnace go out last night. Do you want me to light it?"

"No, thanks. There's no sense in keeping the house heated night and day—I shall be home very little. I'll use the stoves. You can keep warm in the kitchen, can't you?"

Pinnaker had reached the marmalade stage when Mrs. Harker came back for the tray.

"Where has she gone?"

"At the moment, I don't know. She didn't leave word. I expect she'll telephone during the day. What's upsetting you, Mrs. Harker?"

"Her luggage, sir. She didn't take any. You can't count that little attaché case that wouldn't hold any clothes. Her suitcases are in the glory-hole under the stairs. All her clothes are in her room. She must have gone out on that bitter day in just an overall and jumper. No furs. No coat. Wearing those blue house shoes with soles like paper."

Pinnaker was unable to suggest an explanation.

"I know what might have happened, Mr. Pinnaker—but I won't say I believe it did."

"Let's have it, Mrs. Harker—straight from the shoulder."

"That old Buick you've been trying to sell. If somebody brought it back again yesterday afternoon she might have got straight in and driven herself away without thinking what she was doing. And small wonder after all she's been through!"

"No, I'm afraid not. I sold the Buick on Monday. That reminds me—I must send a receipt and the log—"

Mrs. Harker then nerved herself to ask the crucial question. Her words crept out in a near whisper. "What've you done to her?"

"A great deal that I ought not to have done, Mrs. Harker, and I'm ashamed."

He was playing for sympathy and getting it.

"Most of it was through thoughtlessness, but that's no excuse. As a result, she has left me. I didn't want anybody to know because I hoped she would return in a week or two. I still hope she will. I didn't want you to know, so I tried to dodge your questions. For that I apologize."

"You haven't done *me* any harm. But you must have upset her extra special and driven the poor girl off her head. People must have turned round and stared at her—going out in an overall in January! She may have caught pneumonia and that's why she hasn't telephoned for her clothes. Or had an accident. Or lost her wits. What about asking the police to check the hospitals?"

With some reluctance Pinnaker consented, provided Mrs. Harker would come with him.

"I want you to back me up. Tell them everything you know—especially that bit about her not taking any of her clothes. Between us we must convince the police that it's not a case of a wife walking off with a lover. They'll pay more attention to you than to me."

The nearest police station was in the town of Kingbiton, four miles Londonward. Pinnaker gave a brief outline to the superintendent—not mentioning the clothes—then left Mrs. Harker with him and drove on to his office.

Mrs. Harker returned by bus and put in a couple of hours' work at Hillfoot. In that time she thoroughly cleaned and tidied Marion's bedroom. Before she left at two o'clock she had answered one caller in person and four inquiries by telephone. In sum, she told the neighborhood that she did not know where Mrs. Pinnaker had gone, how long she would be away, nor when she had left. These statements met and clashed with the bank manager's information about a sick relation.

In the early evening there were more inquiries, some containing a trap, in which Pinnaker was invariably caught.

Kingbiton had forwarded a report to Missing Persons, Scotland Yard. By midday on Thursday they had picked up the local gossip which tended to feature Freda Culham. But it was the sudden closing of Marion's banking account that brought Chief Inspector Karlake to Hillfoot on Friday morning. Adding Mrs. Harker's testimony of Marion Pinnaker leaving home in an overall and house shoes, Karlake was ready to explore the possibilities of the Floorboards Theory.

Karslake was invited to the most comfortable chair, nearest the electric stove. He was using his frank approach which was so often successful, perhaps because the frankness was genuine.

"It all adds up to what my missus would call queer goings-on. You've given contradictory explanations to different persons. We don't care tuppence about that. At this minute we're starting from scratch. Your wife disappeared on the afternoon of Tuesday the fifth. Will you begin there?"

"I'll have to start a bit further back." Pinnaker was rising to the occasion. "My wife and I had differences, but I did not want to break up. Let it be granted—I don't admit it, you understand—but let it be granted that I had given her cause to divorce me. She was very upset about it. Her religious views prevent her from entertaining the idea of divorce. In a nutshell, she said that she intended to desert me for the statutory three years. At the end of that time I could divorce her if I wished. If I preferred to resume our married life she would have had the three years in which to decide whether she would wish to do so."

"Plenty of others have done that," commented Karslake. "But she didn't have to run away and hide. It's legal desertion if she simply refuses to live under the same roof."

"She knew all that—she's a very knowledgeable woman. She insisted that it must be a genuine desertion, not a mere legal formula. She said she would go away in such a manner that I would not be able to find her. Her angle is that she has an inner need to change her way of living—sort of go into cold storage for three years. I knew it would be very awkward for me. For one thing, our financial arrangements are interlocked—"

"But why did she have to sneak out of the house? Without a change of clothes. Without even an overcoat."

"I just can't make it sound sensible!" Pinnaker was being frank, too.

"Any witnesses to the desertion story?"

"N-no—unless you count Marion herself as a witness." From his pocket case he produced the envelope addressed *Tom*. "I found it on the TV set when I came home that afternoon."

"The flap is stuck down," snapped Karslake.

"Yes—yes, it is." Pinnaker was apologetic. "I may seem rather callous, but the fact is I had other things to attend to at the time and it slipped my memory. Perhaps you would prefer to open it?"



Slipped his memory! A bit offbeat, thought Karslake, as he thumbed the envelope open.

"'Dear Tom,'" he read aloud. "'At your request, I hereby put on record that I intend to desert you, in the moral as well as the legal sense, for the statutory period of three years. During that time I shall not communicate with you and shall make it impossible for you to communicate with me.'"

Karslake looked up. "That confirms her intention to desert you," he admitted.

"The next bit is more important, at the moment," said Pinnaker.

"'I cannot take seriously,'" read Karslake, "'your suggestion that you might be accused of murdering me. If such a fantastic thing were to happen, I would be certain to hear of it and you cannot believe that I would remain in seclusion and allow you to be convicted. Marion Pinnaker.'"

Karslake asked the obvious question: "Did you dictate this letter?"

"I didn't actually dictate it. I wrote out the first paragraph for her, but I only made a note about the murder stuff. As a matter of fact, I added a bit about there being no ill-feeling on either side. I wish she had put that in."

Karslake blinked. Here was a frankness of heroic proportions. He studied the handwriting. It might be genuine. Pinnaker's tale might be true. In fact—a few hours later—the science department reported that the letter had not been forged.

"This letter," said Karslake, "answers all the questions before I've asked 'em. And tidies up all the loose ends—why she put all her money unto Bearer Bonds, why she slipped away without anyone seeing her, why she took no clothes, not wanting to be traced through her luggage."

"Yes," said Pinnaker reflectively. "I think it does cover everything."

"Everything *except*—" Karslake reached for the ashtray "—when and how she left this house."

"Is that so important, Inspector?"

"Between you and me, Mr. Pinnaker, I don't suppose it matters a damn." Karslake laughed and Pinnaker laughed, too. "But as you probably know, we work by formula in these cases. Missing Wife. First thing: Has the husband salted her away under the floorboards? Yes or No. See what I mean?"

"Yes, I do," admitted Pinnaker. "That's why I got her to write that

letter." He was already opening a door. "This house has an attic—you don't want to go up there, do you?"

"It's in the book," smiled Karslake. "Works downwards from roof to foundations."

The attics were a feature of these houses, as they were often required as extra rooms. On the upper landing Pinnaker stopped at a cupboardlike structure.

"Good lord, it's cold up here!" Pinnaker shivered. "I'm not sure I know how to work this thing. I've only been up here once—the week we moved in. We use the attic only for storage."

Karslake found the lever which opened the cupboard, whereupon a fanciful stepladder clanged into position. Pinnaker went up and opened the trapdoor. Karslake followed. Conspicuous among a litter of household articles were two cabin trunks and three old suitcases, all of which proved to be empty.

Back on the upper landing they contemplated five doors.

"The bathroom. The etcetera. And this is the guest room."

Karslake's eye was drawn to the bed by a gaudy coverlet barely covering the mattress which was evidently too big for it. When he went to the curtained recess he noticed an electric cord leading from an outlet in the wall to the mattress itself.

"The Allwhen mattress," Pinnaker remarked. "See that flex? It heats the mattress in winter. Nothing new in that. But look at this switch. Turn it to 'C' and a thermal unit draws out the air between the springs. Ventilates it: uses heat to make you cooler."

He whipped off the coverlet, laid himself full length on the bed, and would have expounded the hygienics of sleep if Karslake had been willing to listen.

The next room was smaller.

"Dressing room," said Pinnaker. "I'm sleeping in it now."

Pinnaker produced a bedroom key and unlocked the next door.

"This is—was—our—her room."

Karslake noted twin beds stripped of bedclothes. Each was equipped with an Allwhen mattress, wired to a double outlet between the beds. He examined a wardrobe, a built-in cupboard, and a curtained corner, all containing clothes. As he flicked the curtain back, the draught dislodged a folded sheet of paper which had been lying flush with the skirting board.

"Looks like a bill," said Pinnaker.

"It's a railway ticket—bought on January second from an agent in Kingbiton—from Honshom to York, via London, first class. Jour-

ney dated for January fifth—last Tuesday. What d'you make of that, Mr. Pinnaker?"

"That she had planned beforehand to leave here on the Tuesday," answered Pinnaker. "But she cannot have planned to start at Honshom station in an overall and house shoes. Something went wrong with her plans. I can't understand it."

"Neither do I," said Karslake. "Anyway, she didn't go near Honshom station—we've checked."

Pinnaker relocked the door before following the Inspector down the stairs.

"The sitting room you've seen. This is the dining room. The other is what we call my study. And there's the kitchen and scullery."

Karslake took the two living rooms first. In the kitchen he opened the cupboards, looked about, hesitated, then went through the scullery to the outhouse. The garden had been examined in Pinnaker's absence.

Back in the kitchen, Karslake pointed at the floor in the direction of the window: "What's that?"

"I can't see what you're pointing at."

Karslake strode forward, then folded back the linoleum which was loose.

"Dammit, Inspector!" Pinnaker laughed grimly. "When you talked about putting wives under floorboards I thought you were joking."

"So I was," said Karslake. "I didn't know then that these boards had been taken up. Look at that nail there—and this one."

"Oh, yes, I remember now!" exclaimed Pinnaker. "A little while ago we had a scare about dry rot."

"Good enough," said Karslake. "We'll check on the dry rot."

He went to the front door and whistled. Three men got out of the police car, one carrying a tool bag and another a pick and spade.

Very shortly, Karslake joined Pinnaker in the sitting room.

"It'll take them about half an hour. While we're waiting, you and I can pick up the loose ends."

Again the two men sat amicably by the stove. Karslake put a number of routine questions, watching Pinnaker for signs of strain. The answers were satisfactory, although Pinnaker invariably was unable to offer a witness.

"After you found your wife gone on Tuesday afternoon, did you leave the house before Wednesday morning?"

"Yes. And here at last I happen to have a witness—or rather, collateral evidence." Pinnaker passed an official-looking paper. "I

found this waiting when I got home this evening. Summons for parking without lights at ten-thirty that night—Tuesday, January fifth—at Shoreham. The Association will represent me and pay the fine."

"Shoreham-on-Sea?" asked Karslake. "What might you have been doing at the seaside in the middle of a cold winter's night?"

"I don't know. I think I went there with the idea of—of drowning myself—"

He broke off as one of Karslake's men knocked and entered.

"No dry rot, sir. And nothing else. The whole area is undisturbed."

"If I may butt in, Inspector," said Pinnaker, "would your staff be kind enough to put everything back? Mrs. Harker is a fussy customer."

"That's all right—we're all house-trained." When they were alone Karslake added, "You were telling me what you did at Shoreham-on-Sea."

Pinnaker looked unhappy.

"Forgive me, Inspector, but this does strike me as rather nightmarish. Floorboards are out of it, so we jump into my car and drive into a jungle of revolting possibilities. Did I hide my wife's body in the car? Did I dump my unhappy wife in the sea? If so, the currents will probably bring her back, though we can't be certain about it, can we? In the hours of darkness I could have covered a large slice of country, couldn't I? The Sussex Downs, for instance—there are lots of dull corners no one ever visits. In Surrey, in the unbuilt parts of the Wey valley, there are innumerable, meaningless little ponds. Hampshire and Bucks are pockmarked with abandoned gravel pits. There are probably at least a hundred disused wells within fifty miles of this house—any one of which I might have used, mightn't I? I mean, your checking technique can hardly cover all that territory, can it?"

"Give the poor old technique a chance." Karslake was not amused. "You tell me where you went in your car that night and I'll do my best to check it."

Pinnaker shook his head.

"Sorry, Inspector! I sincerely thank you for doing an unpleasant job in a thoroughly pleasant way. But, honestly, I've had enough of it. I propose to settle the whole matter myself by getting in touch with my wife."

"That certainly would settle it," admitted Karslake. "You think you can find her without our help?"

"With the help you've already given," corrected Pinnaker, "I'm sure I could interest a newspaper in this garish incident of the floorboards. And all that checking. And my journey after dark in the car. It will be clear to Marion that I am under suspicion and I am confident she will keep her word and come forward."

This chronicle can give no more than the barest outline of the publicity campaign, which stands by itself in the history of crime reporting. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that a man, suspected of murder, voluntarily discarded the protection afforded him by the law. Pinnaker told a conference of reporters that he wanted his wife to know that he was suspected of having murdered her. So he authorized them all to work up the facts in his disfavor and color them with the strong suggestion of guilt. He cooperated generously, even refusing payment for his services.

In an open letter to Marion—front page, center—Pinnaker wrote: "After the police had torn up the floorboards in the kitchen and searched the foundations to see if I had buried you in the manner of Crippen, they asked me—very fairly—to account for a 'journey' in the car during the hours of darkness. It was no journey, Marion. It was a melancholy escape from the loneliness of what had been our home. I can remember only that I drove to the sea—I hardly know why. Everything else is a blank. There are many who believe that I threw your dead body into the sea, or disposed of it somewhere in the countryside."

That may be taken as typical of the directly personal appeal he made in print and on the air. There was always just a touch of resentment in references to the floorboards incident. The rest was extremely fair-minded. The journey by night was the main feature. The sea would be dragged in, rather vaguely, without mention of Shoreham—emphasis being on the gravel pits and the disused wells. And always the moral was rubbed in—that there was such a cogent *prima facie* case against Pinnaker that it was Marion's duty to come forward, and alternatively the duty of anyone who had seen her to report to the police.

On Sunday the first sightseers came to gape at Hillfoot and wander into the garden, whereupon Pinnaker was given a police guard. The only personal friend to seek admittance was Freda Culham.

"This is wonderful of you—I shall never forget it!" exclaimed Pinnaker. "But I wish you had thought of yourself for once. The scandalmongers will make the most of your coming here."

"Darling! I'm in the scandal up to my neck. I'm the Other Woman in the Case—didn't you know? So let's be scandalous in comfort!"

"For one thing," persisted Pinnaker, "we should both feel rather awkward if Marion were to walk in while you're here."

There was a long silence before Freda said, "Tom. On that Tuesday afternoon I was in this house with Marion until about a quarter to three."

"Good lord!" It was the first Pinnaker had heard of it. "She must have rushed out of the house as soon as you had left. Do the police know you were here?"

"I don't think anyone knows. I drove in and parked near the garage." She then described her talk with Marion.

"A quarter to three!" exclaimed Pinnaker. "And yet you stand by me! Just like you—you refuse to believe that I killed her!"

She came close, put her hands on his shoulders. Perhaps at this moment it occurred to him that Freda was one of those women who make excellent mistresses but impossible wives.

"It would be all the same if I did believe you had killed her. She was playing dog-in-the-manger and deserved it. I hated her."

"You don't mean that, Freda—not if I killed Marion!"

"Of course I mean it, silly boy! I don't know how soon we can get married, and it doesn't matter. When all this has blown over—"

"If you don't stop, I shall be sick." He pushed her away. "It's a perfectly revolting idea!"

The quarrel developed on conventional lines, leading to the conventional threat.

"It's the first time I've been thrown down, Tom, and it hurts. Aren't you afraid I might hit back?"

"No, darling." He laughed humorlessly. "Tell the police you were alone in the house with Marion—that she refused your demand for divorce and made you angry—a big strong woman like you who could tuck *her* under your arm. Tell them your car was parked next to the kitchen door. Tell them you left a few minutes before I entered the empty house."

She was so frightened that he had to water it down.

"I am only warning you that people may think you took her away in *your* car. It fits the facts. I am not suggesting you killed her—it's not your style. Besides, Marion is sure to come forward—probably tomorrow, certainly during the week."

But Marion did not come forward during the week—nor the week after.



Pinnaker, the home-lover, adapted his habits to circumstance. His attempt to economize on fuel was abandoned after three days and the house was nearly as comfortable as ever, thanks to Mrs. Harker.

In the third week the publicity simmered down. Then, uninvited, he called on Karslake at Scotland Yard.

Karslake was not very genial.

"The ballyhoo has not produced your wife, Mr. Pinnaker."

"It has been a disappointment," confessed Pinnaker, "a humiliation! Some of my neighbors are cutting me. I shall have to resign from the committee of the tennis club. But I shall have one more try—on my own."

Karslake showed no curiosity.

"The newspapers," continued Pinnaker, "have written themselves dry—they have no new facts. Marion has not responded to facts. But she may respond to sentiment. It was suggested to me that I should write a book—a history of our marriage and an appeal to Marion to return. Under the title *Marion, Come Back*. What do you think of the idea?"

Karslake almost growled. "The only advice I can give you, Mr. Pinnaker, is this: if you think of changing your address, be sure to let us know well in advance."

"There won't be any change of address. I shall have to stay in Honshom and live down the feeling against me—for the full period of three years. After all, my wife promised to come forward if I were in danger of *conviction*. Subject, of course, to your correction, Inspector—I am *not* in danger of conviction."

He was in no danger of conviction on the facts possessed by the police. In the next couple of months no new facts emerged; and the files subsided into the Department of Dead Ends . . .

The Department of Dead Ends could reopen a case only at a tangent—when a ripple from one crime intersected the ripple from another. In May 1955—sixteen months after Marion Pinnaker's disappearance—Detective Inspector Rason was investigating a case of suspected arson in which, among many other things, an old Buick car had been burned out. The car's log had been burned, too, but he was informed that the car had been bought secondhand from a Mr. Bellamy, who lived at Shoreham-on-Sea.

Mr. Bellamy confirmed the sale and added, "I myself bought it secondhand—from a man named Pinnaker. The man who was sup-

posed to have murdered his wife. You remember? Just about the time it all happened, too."

That, thought Rason, was the sort of remark that often led to business. He went through the files of the Pinnaker case. The car sequence showed Pinnaker's admission of the drive by night—to Shoreham-on-Sea. Checked by Karslake on the summons for parking. Checked that the number of the car on the summons was that of a Buick car owned by Pinnaker. That tidied that up. What a pity!

Rason was putting the file away when he remembered to check the license numbers himself.

Number of the Buick car checked by Karslake: PGP 421. Number of the burned-out Buick: PGP 421. The same car!

Nothing in that, thought Rason gloomily. Coincidence that Pinnaker should have happened to drive to Shoreham-on-Sea. Perhaps to clinch the sale of the car to Bellamy? In which case Bellamy might be able to throw some light on Pinnaker's movements that night. Just worth a ring on the chance of showing Chief Inspector Karslake he had missed something.

"Mr. Bellamy, sorry to trouble you again. On the night of Tuesday, January fifth, 1954, did Mr. Pinnaker drive in that Buick to see you at Shoreham?"

"No. I don't think he knows I live here—I dealt with him at his office. Anyhow, he couldn't have driven anywhere in that car on the Tuesday because he delivered it to me the previous day—Monday, the fourth."

Rason perceived only that there had been a tangle of dates.

"One more question if you don't mind, Mr. Bellamy. Did you have any trouble with the police over parking without lights that Tuesday night?—the fifth of January."

"It's funny you should ask. I did park without lights. And when I was going home I saw a chit fixed on the wiper, warning me that I would be reported. But I never got the summons. It just occurs to me, Mr. Rason, that Pinnaker may have got that summons. He delivered the car on Monday but I didn't receive the log from him until the Thursday, so the registration was still in his name."

Rason thanked him effusively. Already he was making wild guesses, all pivoting on his mental pictures of Freda Culham, Mrs. Harker, and Pinnaker himself, none of whom he had ever seen. He called at Pinnaker's office, posing as a prospective client. He was disappointed when he visited Freda Culham, who didn't seem to believe that he had once studied under her late father. And Mrs.

Harker was very rude to him but unwittingly propped up the juciest of his guesses.

The next step was to obtain Chief Inspector Karslake's consent to go ahead—usually a tricky business.

"You've got something there!" said Karslake, when Rason had told him the tale of the "two" cars. "But not very much," he added in his most deflating style. "Pinnaker lied about the night ride: Maybe he didn't leave the house at all that night. That doesn't make him a killer."

"Let's try it the other way round," Rason went on, holding himself in. "You get a tip-off that Pinnaker may have scuppered his wife and buried her at home. You search the house and you find no body. Okay! You're all smiles and apologies for troubling him. How does he react?"

"He didn't."

"Just so! When you tell Pinnaker he's in the clear, does he say 'cheers!'—like anybody else? No! He says, 'Mr. Karslake, don't be too sure I haven't murdered my wife, just because you found nothing under the floorboards! I went out for a long drive as soon as it was dark. How d'you know I didn't take the body along and dump it?' He didn't use those words, but that's what it adds up to. And now we know the midnight ride was a lie!"

"But not necessarily a killer's lie."

"What's more," persisted Rason, ignoring the interruption, "Pinnaker flashed that parking summons to fake evidence that he had driven to the sea!"

"It doesn't surprise me as much as you'd think," said Karslake. "Take that letter the wife was supposed to have left behind for him. She wrote it herself, all right. But it was a darned funny letter. And that business about the way she was dressed—going out in winter in her indoor rig—that was darned funny, too!"

"Which is the funny bit?" asked Rason.

"That book of his. Story of his married life—might have been almost anybody's married life. Yet it sold a couple of hundred thousand copies. And one of the Sunday papers printed about half of it in bits each week. Must have brought him thousands of pounds. He talks soft, but he's no softie."

Rason had missed the cash angle on the book. It took most of the wind out of his sails.

"Anything else?" asked Karslake.

"Mrs. Harker, for instance," said Rason with his customary ir-

relevance. "She's what I call a tower of strength. D'you know she nearly sacked herself because Pinnaker wouldn't let her use the furnace to keep the place warm? That was about the time when you made your examination of the house."

"Furnace? There was nothing in the furnace."

"Just so!" chirped Rason. "There was nothing in the furnace—when there ought to've been—if you understand me."

"I don't!" snapped Karslake. "One thing at a time! Tie him down on that car story of his and we'll charge him with creating a public mischief by misleading the police."

Pinnaker was making a very good job of living down the scandal. True, he could not appear at the tennis club, but a minority were ready to pass the time of day at a chance meeting. The police had left him unmolested. He had never been seen with Freda Culham and it was obvious that their friendship had ended. Mrs. Harker stood by him. Some believed that Marion would reappear at the end of the three-year period. His habits were as regular as ever except that he was frequently away from home on weekends. There were two sides to every question—and so on.

Pinnaker showed no recognition of Rason when the latter gave him name, but he greeted Karslake as an old acquaintance.

The police rarely have a personal animosity against a suspect unless he gives them personal cause. They accepted his offer of a drink. A little small talk passed quietly. Then Rason opened up—and in a manner that shocked his superior.

"A few days ago, Mr. Pinnaker, I talked to a Mr. Bellamy—the man who bought your old Buick. The short of it is we know now that your tale about going out after dark to Shoreham-on-Sea is all punk. You never left the house that night."

Karslake registered unease.

Rason rippled on: "That drive by night! Corpse in the car or *not*, according to taste! What was the idea, Mr. Pinnaker?"

"There was no idea—I told it on the spur of the moment. A childish impulse. And this is where I lost face." He made an appealing gesture which had no effect.

"Listen, please! It was obvious that Mr. Karslake believed me to be innocent of any criminal act. So when he started to search the house I did not take it seriously. To me, it was like a parlor game—I'll be the Murderer and you be the Detective. Without any effort, I began to identify myself with all the men who had murdered their wives and hidden their bodies. I tingled with fear. I felt

guilty—in the sense that an actor can feel guilty while he is playing a murderer. I got a tremendous thrill out of it.”

“Yes, but what about that car story?” pressed Rason.

“Wait! Mr. Karslake and I came downstairs. The whole experience was ending rather tamely—when Mr. Karslake spotted that the floorboards in the kitchen had been taken up recently. I told him about the dry rot and he did not believe me! Quite suddenly, he saw me as a murderer who had concealed my wife’s body under the floorboards. Floorboards, by heaven! Crippen! *Me!* It was wonderful. I had never felt so stimulated in my life. We sat in this room. Mr. Karslake asked me some questions to help him build up the case—which I knew would be shattered in half an hour when the men found no body.

“Like a dope addict, I wanted more—and at once. I remembered that summons for parking—I knew it was intended for Bellamy, but I couldn’t resist the temptation. With the summons to back up a car story I could go on playing the role of suspected man—living under a hanging sword that could never possibly fall. To you no doubt it sounds silly—perhaps even contemptible. I do not defend myself—and I suppose it’s no good apologizing now.”

Both Karslake and Rason had dealt with psychopaths who try to get themselves suspected for the sake of the thrill. Their silence encouraged Pinnaker to keep talking.

“My wife disappeared on the Tuesday afternoon, if you remember. By midday on Wednesday, Mrs. Harker’s well meant chatter had alerted half the neighborhood. If there had been a corpse in the house I couldn’t possibly have moved it later than Wednesday morning—I couldn’t have moved a dead rabbit without everybody knowing. Therefore I had to concentrate suspicion of myself as of that Tuesday evening.”

“So it was just a jolly prank,” muttered Rason. “Was Mrs. Pinnaker playing, too? That letter she wrote about coming forward if you were in danger? Was that part of the prank?”

“Certainly not!”

“We needn’t go into that now,” snapped Karslake.

“My superior officer,” said Rason, nodding at Karslake, “is more interested in how and when Mrs. Pinnaker left this house. He won’t tie you to that tale about her going away dressed in house clothes and nothing else but ten thousand quid in a briefcase.”

“To the best of my belief that is what she did.”

“Come, Mr. Pinnaker! If she was excited or absentminded she’d

have been pulled up by the cold before she reached the gate. And if she was out of her mind and started walking away to nowhere, how far would she get in this suburb where pretty nearly everybody knows her? Dressed like that in January, she'd have been as conspicuous as if she'd been got up as a fan dancer. Yet no one saw her."

"I have nothing to add," said Pinnaker.

"Then I'll add a bit," retorted Rason. "Your wife did *not* leave the house that Tuesday. Something went wrong with your plans. And she didn't leave that Wednesday nor that Thursday nor that Friday. *Your wife was in this house when my superior officer searched it!*"

"You wouldn't answer that, Mr. Pinnaker," said Karslake. "It's ridiculous!"

Rason grinned at his senior. "Did you look under the beds—sir?"

Both men stared at him.

"Yes, under the beds!" Rason repeated. "All those jokes about burglars under the bed—as if any burglar would be such a fool! It's such a damn silly place to hide anyone—living or dead—that when you come to think of it, it's rather a good place."

For a moment Karslake was doubtful.

"I was looking for a corpse—"

"And the corpse had to be under the floorboards!" cut in Rason.

"—I wasn't looking for a living woman. Come to that, she could have stayed in the attic while Mrs. Harker was here in the mornings. And dodged about while I was searching the house—"

"Couldn't she though! Let's try it—if Mr. Pinnaker doesn't mind."

Again they began upstairs. On the top landing, the built-in ladder clanged into position and clanged back again when Karslake decided that no woman, however slight, could have remained hidden in the attic.

"She couldn't have dodged from one room while I was in another and slipped up to the attic, because I would have heard that ladder." Glaring at Rason, he added, "If she *was* in the house when I searched it, she must have been in one of the rooms on this landing."

He opened the nearest door, which was that of the guest room.

"There you are! I didn't look under that bed because I can see under it from the doorway."

"Quite right," agreed Rason, himself stepping into the room and examining the bed. "So this is the Allwhen mattress." He observed the electric cord running from the mattress to an outlet in the wall. "Hot and cold laid on. Mrs. Harker told me about 'em—said they were unhealthy because—"



He was talking to himself. The others had inspected the smaller room and he joined them in the corridor.

"This is the big room," Pinnaker was saying. "It was—our room. It has not been in use since she left." The hint was not taken by Karslake and Pinnaker produced a single key on a pocket chain, then opened the door.

The windows were shut and the room had a disagreeable mustiness. The twin beds were as Karslake had last seen them except for a slight film of dust. Pinnaker was chattering like an anxious host. He observed that Rason's eye was on one of the mattresses.

"That's an Allwhen mattress, too. By means of an insulated—"

"Yes, I've been told how they work," interrupted Rason and turned to Karslake.

"You've heard me speak of my niece—"

"Tell Mr. Pinnaker some other time," scowled Karslake.

"She's a fair-sized young woman. I measured her yesterday. Not for roundness—for thickness. Meaning the highest point of her when she's lying flat on the sitting-room floor. A shade over nine inches, she made."

He strode to the nearer bed, unfolded a pocket rule, and measured the sides of the Allwhen mattress.

"Ten inches thick," he announced. He folded the pocket rule. "Mrs. Pinnaker was a small woman, wasn't she?"

"Five foot three—and slender," answered Pinnaker.

"Small enough to fit easily inside one of these mattresses—in which case Mr. Karslake would probably have missed it, having his mind on floorboards."

"I don't think a skilled eye could be deceived—nor even an unskilled one," said Pinnaker indulgently. "If you remove the springs and the insulation and the cold-air conduit, you have little more than a canvas bag. The silhouette of a human being—"

"There'd be no silhouette if she'd been packed in nicely by a skilled upholsterer. When you were a youngster at Bettinson's, Mr. Pinnaker, you learned upholstery, didn't you?"

"True enough," answered Pinnaker. "But the most skilled upholsterer in the world could not prevent a corpse enclosed in such a mattress from declaring its presence after a day or two."

"That's right!" cried Karslake. "If there had been a corpse in one of the mattresses that evening, I couldn't have helped knowing it. But I'll own up I'd have missed a *living* woman!"

"A living woman sewn up in a mattress?" asked Pinnaker.

"Sewn up or buttoned up by a skilled upholsterer an hour before I arrived. That mattress has about a dozen air vents—and you could have prepared it weeks beforehand."

Pinnaker looked thoughtful.

"Physically possible, I suppose," he murmured. "But what on earth for? What would be the purpose of such a trick—which, as you say, must have been planned beforehand?"

Karslake answered the question with another.

"How many thousands did you make on that book of yours, Mr. Pinnaker—*Marion, Come Back?*"

Pinnaker caught his breath.

"You used Mrs. Harker pretty smartly," continued Karslake. "You two did some conjuring tricks with those clothes. You gave Mrs. Harker faked evidence. So she told us in good faith that tale about your wife going away in her houseclothes—so's you could be dead certain the police would come here and search the house for a corpse. You played up the newspapers and the TV, as you played up Mrs. Harker. And now you're going to tell me that as a result of all that advertisement no one was more surprised than yourself when two or three hundred thousand suckers bought that book."

"Suckers!" echoed Pinnaker. He flushed and his voice revealed an unsuspected aggressiveness. "Let me tell you something! That book may have had its faults from a literary angle. But the public liked it. They bought it—they passed it from hand to hand—and they talked about it. And you have the effrontery to call them *suckers!*"

Rason stepped between them. Karslake regarded Pinnaker with some surprise.

"I apologize for saying 'suckers'," he said coldly. "But you admit that the two of you hoaxed us—as well as the newspapers?"

"Absolute rot!" stormed Pinnaker. Then with sudden calm he continued, as if repeating a prepared statement: "I admit only that I personally misled the police with that car story. I expect to be prosecuted for having caused mischief, or whatever you call it. I deny that my wife helped me in any way whatever. Alternatively, if she did help me, she did so 'under the domination of her husband.' You can't touch her."

"Good enough!" snapped Karslake. "It's your case, Rason. You can take his statement."

When Karslake had left the house Rason rejoined Pinnaker in the sitting room.

"This statement will take some time, won't it?" suggested Pin-

naker, producing a portable typewriter. "Shall we have another drink before we start?"

"Not for me, thanks." Rason's tone carried a reminder of more important things. "Never mind the typewriter. What about that furnace of yours? The one that heats the house."

Pinnaker smoothed the hair from his forehead.

"Your senior got my goat, Mr. Rason. I'm finding it hard to concentrate. If you won't join me, d'you mind if I have a drink by myself?"

He opened the cocktail cabinet. His back was toward Rason but his face was reflected in a glass panel of the bookcase.

"At the time, Mr. Pinnaker, you were hard pressed for a thousand pounds. Saving a trifle on house fuel wouldn't have helped you. You let the fire out on that Tuesday night. You kept it out during Wednesday and Thursday. But on Friday—after the house had been searched for the dead body of your wife—you lit the fire again and heated the house."

"In a crisis one's small acts are sometimes idiotic." Pinnaker's face showed indifference but Rason was watching his hands, reflected almost as clearly as if the glass panel had been a mirror.

A second later Rason crept up like a cat and snatched the half filled tumbler of whiskey.

"What's that you dropped in the glass?" Rason demanded.

"Only a sedative. I told you Karslake had rattled me."

"Then it wouldn't do me any harm." Rason raised the glass to his lips.

"If you think that it will kill you," said Pinnaker calmly. "I don't think you intend to drink it, but I daren't take the risk."

"Good boy!" said Rason. There was a long silence while he opened his bag, poured the contents of the glass into a small bottle, then shut the bag. "There's not much of the murderer about you, Mr. Pinnaker. When she wouldn't let you have that thousand you lost your temper and dotted her one. Didn't you? I'm just guessing."

"You are! All you've got is that I tried to kill myself," said Pinnaker. "How much do you *know*?"

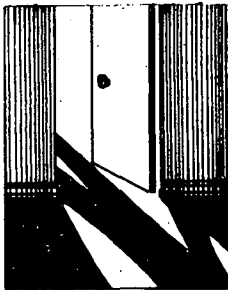
"Not all of it," admitted Rason. "But I'll tell you what I think happened. You gave her that unlucky wallop on Tuesday afternoon. You put her in the attic, out of Mrs. Harker's way. You kept the house close to freezing for obvious reasons. You had plenty of time to doctor that mattress and get her sewn up inside before the Chief Inspector came on Friday morning. And you messed about with the

floorboards, so's he'd be certain to have 'em up. Then everybody would be sure that there was no corpse in the house. Am I right?"

"As there are no witnesses present—yes, you are substantially right." Pinnaker thrust his hands into his pockets as if he no longer trusted them. "But you still have no evidence. After that Friday, I was able to use my other car without anyone suspecting that it might contain a corpse—and so was able to hide it in the countryside—"

"No good, laddie," interrupted Rason. "The safest place in the world to hide that corpse was the one place where Chief Inspector Karlake had reported that there was no corpse!"

They found, buried under the floorboards, an attaché case containing ten thousand pounds in Bearer Bonds—and the body of Marion Pinnaker, dressed in jumper, skirt, and overall, the thin blue house shoes still on her tiny feet.



## Clark Howard

### Horn Man

When Dix stepped off the Greyhound bus in New Orleans, old Rainey was waiting for him near the terminal entrance. He looked just the same as Dix remembered him. Old Rainey had always looked old, since Dix had known him, ever since Dix had been a little boy. He had skin like black saddle-leather and patches of cotton-white hair, and his shoulders were round and stooped. When he was contemplating something, he chewed on the inside of his cheeks, pushing his pursed lips in and out as if he were revving up for speech. He was doing that when Dix walked up to him.

"Hey, Rainey."

Rainey blinked surprise and then his face split into a wide smile of perfect, gleaming teeth. "Well, now. Well, well, well, now." He looked Dix up and down. "They give you that there suit of clothes?"

Dix nodded. "Everyone gets a suit of clothes if they done more than a year." Dix's eyes, the lightest blue possible without being grey, hardened just enough for Rainey to notice. "And I sure done more than a year," he added.

"That's the truth," Rainey said. He kept the smile on his face and changed the subject as quickly as possible. "I got you a room in the Quarter. Figured that's where you'd want to stay."

Dix shrugged. "It don't matter no more."

"It will," Rainey said with the confidence of years. "It will when you hear the music again."

Dix did not argue the point. He was confident that none of it mattered. Not the music, not the French Quarter, none of it. Only one thing mattered to Dix.

"Where is she, Rainey?" he asked. "Where's Madge?"

"I don't rightly know," Rainey said.

Dix studied him for a moment. He was sure Rainey was lying. But it didn't matter. There were others who would tell him.

They walked out of the terminal, the stooped old black man and the tall, prison-hard white man with a set to his mouth and a canvas zip-bag containing all his worldly possessions. It was late afternoon: the sun was almost gone and the evening coolness was coming in.

They walked toward the Quarter, Dix keeping his long-legged pace slow to accommodate old Rainey.

Rainey glanced at Dix several times as they walked, chewing inside his mouth and working up to something. Finally he said, "You been playing at all while you was in?"

Dix shook his head. "Not for a long time. I did a little the first year. Used to dry play, just with my mouthpiece. After a while, though, I gave it up. They got a different kind of music over there in Texas. Stompin' music. Not my style." Dix forced a grin at old Rainey. "I ever kill a man again, I'll be sure I'm on *this* side of the Louisiana line."

Rainey scowled. "You know you ain't never killed nobody, boy," he said harshly. "You know it wudn't you that done it. It was *her*."

Dix stopped walking and locked eyes with old Rainey. "How long have you knowed me?" he asked.

"Since you was eight months old," Rainey said. "You know that. Me and my sistuh, we worked for your grandmamma, Miz Jessie DuChatelier. She had the finest gentlemen's house in the Quarter. Me and my sistuh, we cleaned and cooked for Miz Jessie. And took care of you after your own poor mamma took sick with the consumption and died—"

"Anyway, you've knowed me since I was less than one, and now I'm forty-one."

Rainey's eyes widened. "Naw," he said, grinning again, "you ain't that old. Naw."

"Forty-one, Rainey. I been gone sixteen years. I got twenty-five, remember? And I done sixteen."

Sudden worry erased Rainey's grin. "Well, if you forty-one, how old that make *me*?"

"About two hundred. I don't know. You must be seventy or eighty. Anyway, listen to me now. In all the time you've knowed me, have I ever let anybody make a fool out of me?"

Rainey shook his head. "Never. No way."

"That's right. And I'm not about to start now. But if word got around that I done sixteen years for a killing that was somebody else's, I'd look like the biggest fool that ever walked the levee, wouldn't I?"

"I reckon so," Rainey allowed.

"Then don't ever say again that I didn't do. Only one person alive knows for certain positive that I didn't do it. And I'll attend to her myself. Understand?"

Rainey chewed the inside of his cheeks for a moment, then asked, "What you fixin' to do about her?"

Dix's light-blue eyes hardened again. "Whatever I have to do, Rainey," he replied.

Rainey shook his head in slow motion. "Lord, Lord, Lord," he whispered.

Old Rainey went to see Gaston that evening at Tradition Hall, the jazz emporium and restaurant that Gaston owned in the Quarter. Gaston was slick and dapper. For him, time had stopped in 1938. He still wore spats.

"How does he look?" Gaston asked old Rainey.

"He *look* good," Rainey said. "He *talk* bad." Rainey leaned close to the white club owner. "He fixin' to kill that woman. Sure as God made sundown."

Gaston stuck a sterling-silver toothpick in his mouth. "He know where she is?"

"I don't think so," said Rainey. "Not yet."

"You know where she is?"

"Lastest I heard, she was living over on Burgundy Street with some doper."

Gaston nodded his immaculately shaved and lotioned chin. "Correct. The doper's name is LeBeau. He's young. I think he keeps her around to take care of him when he's sick." Gaston examined his beautifully manicured nails. "Does Dix have a lip?"

Rainey shook his head. "He said he ain't played in a while. But a natural like him, he can get his lip back in no time a'tall."

"Maybe," said Gaston.

"He can," Rainey insisted.

"Has he got a horn?"

"Naw. I watched him unpack his bag and I didn't see no horn. So I axed him about it. He said after a few years of not playing, he just give it away. To some cowboy he was in the Texas pen with."

Gaston sighed. "He should have killed that fellow on this side of the state line. If he'd done the killing in Louisiana, he would have went to the pen at Angola. They play good jazz at Angola. Eddie Lumm is up there. You remember Eddie Lumm? Clarinetist. Learned to play from Frank Teschemacher and Jimmie Noone. Eddie killed his old lady. So now he blows at Angola. They play good jazz at Angola."

Rainey didn't say anything. He wasn't sure if Gaston thought Dix

had really done the killing or not. Sometimes Gaston *played* like he didn't know a thing, just to see if somebody *else* knew it. Gaston was smart. Smart enough to help keep Dix out of trouble if he was of a mind. Which was what old Rainey was hoping for.

Gaston drummed his fingertips silently on the table where they sat. "So. You think Dix can get his lip back with no problem, is that right?"

"Tha's right. He can."

"He planning to come around and see me?"

"I don't know. He probably set on finding that woman first. Then he might not be *able* to come see you."

"Well, see if you can get him to come see me first. Tell him I've got something for him. Something I've been saving for him. Will you do that?"

"You bet." Rainey got up from the table. "I'll go do it right now."

George Tennell was big and beefy and mean. Rumor had it that he had once killed two men by smashing their heads together with such force that he literally knocked their brains out. He had been a policeman for thirty years, first in the colored section, which was the only place he could work in the old days, and now in the *Vieux Carre*, the Quarter, where he was detailed to keep the peace to whatever extent it was possible. He had no family, claimed no friends. The Quarter was his home as well as his job. The only thing in the world he admitted to loving was jazz.

That was why, every night at seven, he sat at a small corner table in Tradition Hall and ate dinner while he listened to the band tune their instruments and warm up. Most nights, Gaston joined him later for a liqueur. Tonight he joined him before dinner.

"Dix got back today," he told the policeman. "Remember Dix?"

Tennell nodded. "Horn man. Killed a fellow in a motel room just across the Texas line. Over a woman named Madge Noble."

"That's the one. Only there's some around don't think he did it. There's some around think *she* did it."

"Too bad he couldn't have found twelve of those people for his jury."

"He didn't have no jury, George. Quit laying back on me. You remember it as well as I do. One thing you'd *never* forget is a good horn man."

Tennell's jaw shifted to the right a quarter of an inch, making his mouth go crooked. The band members were coming out of the back



now and moving around on the bandstand, unsnapping instrument cases, inserting mouthpieces, straightening chairs. They were a mixed lot—black, white, and combinations; clean-shaven and goateed; balding and not; clear-eyed and strung out. None of them was under fifty—the oldest was the trumpet player, Luther Dodd, who was eighty-six. Like Louis Armstrong, he had learned to blow at the elbow of Joe “King” Oliver, the great cornetist. His Creole-style trumpet playing was unmatched in New Orleans. Watching him near the age when he would surely die was agony for the jazz purists who frequented Tradition Hall.

Gaston studied George Tennell as the policeman watched Luther Dodd blow out the spit plug of his gleaming Balfour trumpet and loosen up his stick-brittle fingers on the valves. Gaston saw in Tennell’s eyes that odd look of a man who truly worshipped traditional jazz music, who felt it down in the pit of himself just like the old men who played it, but who had never learned to play himself. It was a look that had the mix of love and sadness and years gone by. It was the only look that ever turned Tennell’s eyes soft.

“You know how long I been looking for a horn man to take Luther’s place?” Gaston asked. “A straight year. I’ve listened to a couple dozen guys from all over. Not a one of them could play traditional. Not a one.” He bobbed his chin at Luther Dodd. “His fingers are like old wood, and so’s his heart. He could go on me any night. And if he does, I’ll have to shut down. Without a horn man, there’s no Creole sound, no tradition at all. Without a horn, this place of mine, which is the last of the great jazz emporiums, will just give way to—” Gaston shrugged helplessly “—whatever. Disco music, I suppose.”

A shudder circuited George Tennell’s spine, but he gave no outward sign of it. His body was absolutely still, his hands resting motionlessly on the snow-white tablecloth, eyes steadily fixed on Luther Dodd. Momentarily the band went into its first number, *Lafayette*, played Kansas City-style after the way of Bennie Moten. The music pulsed out like spurts of water, each burst overlapping the one before it to create an even wave of sound that flooded the big room. Because Kansas City-style was so rhythmic and highly danceable, some of the early diners immediately moved onto the dance floor and fell in with the music.

Ordinarily, Tennell liked to watch people dance while he ate; the moving bodies lent emphasis to the music he loved so much, music he had first heard from the window of the St. Pierre Colored Or-

phanage on Decatur Street when he had been a boy; music he had grown up with and would have made his life a part of if he had not been so completely talentless, so inept that he could not even read sharps and flats. But tonight he paid no attention to the couples out in front of the bandstand. He concentrated only on Luther Dodd and the old horn man's breath intake as he played. It was clear to Tennell that Luther was struggling for breath, fighting for every note he blew, utilizing every cubic inch of lung power that his old body could marshal.

After watching Luther all the way through *Lafayette*, and halfway through *Davenport Blues*, Tennell looked across the table at Gaston and nodded.

"All right," he said simply. "All right."

For the first time ever, Tennell left the club without eating dinner.

As Dix walked along with old Rainey toward Gaston's club, Rainey kept pointing out places to him that he had not exactly forgotten, but had not remembered in a long time.

"That house there," Rainey said, "was where Paul Mares was born back in nineteen-and-oh-one. He's the one formed the original New Orleans Rhythm Kings. He only lived to be forty-eight but he was one of the best horn men of all time."

Dix would remember not necessarily the person himself but the house and the story of the person and how good he was. He had grown up on those stories, gone to sleep by them as a boy, lived the lives of the men in them many times over as he himself was being taught to blow trumpet by Rozell "The Lip" Page when Page was already past sixty and he, Dix, was only eight. Later, when Page died, Dix's education was taken over by Shepherd Norden and Blue Johnny Meadows, the two alternating as his teacher between their respective road tours. With Page, Norden, and Meadows in his background, it was no wonder that Dix could blow traditional.

"Right up the street there," Rainey said as they walked, "is where Wingy Manone was born in nineteen-and-oh-four. His given name was Joseph, but after his accident everybody taken to calling him 'Wingy.' The accident was, he fell under a streetcar and lost his right arm. But that boy didn't let a little thing like that worry him none, no sir. He learned to play trumpet *left-handed*, and *one-handed*. And he was good. Lord, he was good."

They walked along Dauphin and Chartres and Royal. All around them were the French architecture and grillework and statuary and

vines and moss that made the *Vieux Carre* a world unto itself, a place of subtle sights, sounds, and smells—black and white and fish and age—that no New Orleans tourist, no Superdome visitor, no casual observer, could ever experience, because to experience was to understand, and understanding of the Quarter could not be acquired, it had to be lived.

"Tommy Ladnier, he used to live right over there," Rainey said, "right up on the second floor. He lived there when he came here from his hometown of Mandeville, Loozey-ana. Poor Tommy, he had a short life, too—only thirty-nine years. But it was a good life. He played with King Oliver and Fletcher Henderson and Sidney Bechet. Yessir, he got in some good licks."

When they got close enough to Tradition Hall to hear the music, at first faintly, then louder, clearer, Rainey stopped talking. He wanted Dix to hear the music, to *feel* the sound of it as it wafted out over Pirate's Alley and the Café du Monde and Congo Square (they called it Beauregard Square now, but Rainey refused to recognize the new name). Instinctively, Rainey knew that it was important for the music to get back into Dix, to saturate his mind and catch in his chest and tickle his stomach. There were some things in Dix that needed to be washed out, some bad things, and Rainey was certain that the music would help. A good purge was always healthy.

Rainey was grateful, as they got near enough to define melody, that *Sweet Georgia Brown* was being played. It was a good melody to come home to.

They walked on, listening, and after a while Dix asked, "Who's on horn?"

"Luther Dodd."

"Don't sound like Luther. What's the matter with him?"

Rainey waved one hand resignedly. "Old. Dying, I 'spect."

They arrived at the Hall and went inside. Gaston met them with a smile. "Dix," he said, genuinely pleased, "it's good to see you." His eyes flicked over Dix. "The years have been good to you. Trim. Lean. No grey hair. How's your lip?"

"I don't have a lip no more, Mr. Gaston," said Dix. "Haven't had for years."

"But he can get it back quick enough," Rainey put in. "He gots a natural lip."

"I don't play no more, Mr. Gaston," Dix told the club owner.

"That's too bad," Gaston said. He bobbed his head toward the stairs. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

Dix and Rainey followed Gaston upstairs to his private office. The office was furnished the way Gaston dressed—old-style, roaring Twenties. There was even a wind-up Victrola in the corner.

Gaston worked the combination of a large, ornate floor vault and pulled its big-tiered door open. From somewhere in its dark recess he withdrew a battered trumpet case, one of the very old kind with heavy brass fittings on the corners and, one knew, real velvet, not felt, for a lining. Placing it gently in the center of his desk, Gaston carefully opened the snaplocks and lifted the top. Inside, indeed on real velvet, deep-purple real velvet, was a gleaming, silver, hand-etched trumpet. Dix and Rainey stared at it in unabashed awe.

"Know who it once belonged to?" Gaston asked.

Neither Dix nor Rainey replied. They were mesmerized by the instrument. Rainey had not seen one like it in fifty years. Dix had *never* seen one like it; he had only heard stories about the magnificent silver horns that the quadroons made of contraband silver carefully hidden away after the War Between the States. Because the silver cache had not, as it was supposed to, been given over to the Federal Army as part of the reparations levied against the city, the quadroons, during the Union occupation, had to be very careful what they did with it. Selling it for value was out of the question. Using it for silver service, candlesticks, walking canes, or any other of the more obvious uses would have attracted the notice of a Union informer. But letting it lie dormant, even though it was safer as such, was intolerable to the quads, who refused to let a day go by without circumventing one law or another.

So they used the silver to plate trumpets and cornets and slide trombones that belonged to the tabernacle musicians who were just then beginning to experiment with the old Sammsamounn tribal music that would eventually mate with work songs and prison songs and gospels, and evolve into traditional blues, which would evolve into traditional, or Dixie-style, jazz.

"Look at the initials," Gaston said, pointing to the top of the bell. Dix and Rainey peered down at three initials etched in the silver: BRB.

"Lord have mercy," Rainey whispered. Dix's lips parted as if he too intended to speak, but no words sounded.

"That's right," Gaston said. "Blind Ray Blount. The first, the best, the *only*. Nobody has ever touched the sounds he created. That man hit notes nobody ever heard before—or since. He was the master."

"Amen," Rainey said. He nodded his head toward Dix. "Can he touch it?"

"Go ahead," Gaston said to Dix.

Like a pilgrim to Mecca touching the holy shroud, Dix ever so lightly placed the tips of three fingers on the silver horn. As he did, he imagined he could feel the touch left there by the hands of the amazing blind horn man who had started the great blues evolution in a patch of town that later became Storyville. He imagined that—

"It's yours if you want it," Gaston said. "All you have to do is pick it up and go downstairs and start blowing."

Dix wet his suddenly dry lips. "Tomorrow I—"

"Not tomorrow," Gaston said. "Tonight. Now."

"Take it, boy," Rainey said urgently.

Dix frowned deeply, his eyes narrowing as if he felt physical pain. He swallowed, trying to push an image out of his mind, an image he had clung to for sixteen years. "I can't tonight—"

"Tonight or never," Gaston said firmly.

"For God's sake, boy, take it!" said old Rainey.

But Dix could not. The image of Madge would not let him.

Dix shook his head violently, as if to rid himself of devils, and hurried from the room.

Rainey ran after him and caught up with him a block from the Hall. "Don't do it," he pleaded. "Hear me now. I'm an old man and I know I ain't worth nothin' to nobody, but I'm begging you, boy, please, please, please don't do it. I ain't never axed you for nothing in my whole life, but I'm axing you for this: *please* don't do it."

"I got to," Dix said quietly. "It ain't that I want to; I *got* to."

"But why, boy? *Why?*"

"Because we made a promise to each other," Dix said. "That night in that Texas motel room, the man Madge was with had told her he was going to marry her. He'd been telling her that for a long time. But he was already married and kept putting off leaving his wife. Finally Madge had enough of it. She asked me to come to her room between sets. I knew she was just doing it to make him jealous, but it didn't matter none to me. I'd been crazy about her for so long that I'd do anything she asked me to, and she knew it."

"So between sets I slipped across the highway to where she had her room. But he was already there. I could hear through the transom that he was roughing her up some, but the door was locked and I couldn't get in. Then I heard a shot and everything got quiet. A

minute later Madge opened the door and let me in. The man was laying across the bed dying. Madge started bawling and saying how they would put her in the pen and how she wouldn't be able to stand it, she'd go crazy and kill herself.

"It was then I asked her if she'd wait for me if I took the blame for her. She promised me she would. And I promised her I'd come back to her." Dix sighed quietly. "That's what I'm doing, Rainey—keeping my promise."

"And what going to happen if she ain't kept *hers*?" Rainey asked.

"Mamma Rulat asked me the same thing this afternoon when I asked her where Madge was at." Mamma Rulat was an octaroon fortuneteller who always knew where everyone in the Quarter lived.

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I'd do what I had to do. That's all a man *can* do, Rainey."

Dix walked away, up a dark side street. Rainey, watching him go, shook his head in the anguish of the aged and helpless.

"Lord, Lord, Lord—"

The house on Burgundy Street had once been a grand mansion with thirty rooms and a tiled French courtyard with a marble fountain in its center. It had seen nobility and aristocracy and great generals come and go with elegant, genteel ladies on their arms. Now the thirty rooms were rented individually with hotplate burners for light cooking, and the only ladies who crossed the courtyard were those of the New Orleans night.

A red light was flashing atop a police car when Dix got there, and uniformed policemen were blocking the gate into the courtyard. There was a small curious crowd talking about what happened.

"A doper named LeBeau," someone said. "He's been shot."

"I heard it," an old man announced. "I heard the shot."

"There's where it happened, that window right up there—"

Dix looked up, but as he did another voice said, "They're bringing him out now!"

Two morgue attendants wheeled a sheet-covered gurney across the courtyard and lifted it into the back of a black panel truck. Several policemen, led by big beefy George Tennell, brought a woman out and escorted her to the car with the flashing red light. Dix squinted, focusing on her in the inadequate courtyard light. He frowned. Madge's mother, he thought, his mind going back two decades. What's Madge's mother got to do with this?"

Then he remembered. Madge's mother was dead. She had died five years after he had gone to the pen.

Then who—?

*Madge?*

Yes, it *was* her. It was Madge. Older, as he was. Not a girl any more, as he was not a boy any more. For a moment he found it difficult to equate the woman in the courtyard with the memory in his mind. But it was Madge, all right.

Dix tried to push forward, to get past the gate into the courtyard, but two policemen held him back. George Tennell saw the altercation and came over.

"She's under arrest, mister," Tennell told Dix. "Can't nobody talk to her but a lawyer right now."

"What's she done, anyhow?" Dix asked.

"Killed her boyfriend," said Tennell. "Shot him with this."

He showed Dix a pearl-handled over-and-under Derringer two-shot.

"Her boyfriend?"

Tennell nodded. "Young feller. 'Bout twenty-five. Neighbors say she was partial to young fellers. Some women are like that."

"Who says she shot him?"

"I do. I was in the building at the time, on another matter. I heard the shot. Matter of fact, I was the first one to reach the body. Few minutes later she come waltzing in. Oh, she put on a good act, all right, like she didn't even know what happened. But I found the gun in her purse myself."

By now the other officers had Madge Noble in the police car and were waiting for Tennell. He slipped the Derringer into his coat pocket and hitched up his trousers. Jutting his big jaw out an inch, he fixed Dix in a steady gaze.

"If she's a friend of yours, don't count on her being around for a spell. She'll do a long time for this."

Tennell walked away, leaving Dix still outside the gate. Dix waited there, watching, as the police car came through to the street. He tried to catch a glimpse of Madge as it passed, but there was not enough light in the back seat where they had her. As soon as the car left, the people who had gathered around began to leave, too.

Soon Dix was the only one standing there.

At midnight George Tennell was back at his usual table in Tradition Hall for the dinner he had missed earlier. Gaston came over

and joined him. For a few minutes they sat in silence, watching Dix up on the bandstand. He was blowing the silver trumpet that had once belonged to Blind Ray Blount; sitting next to the aging Luther Dodd; jumping in whenever he could as they played *Tailspin Blues*, then *Tank Town Bump*, then *Everybody Loves My Baby*.

"Sounds like he'll be able to get his lip back pretty quick," Tennell observed.

"Sure," said Gaston. "He's a natural. Rozell Page was his first teacher, you know."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Sure." Gaston adjusted the celluloid collar he wore, and turned the diamond stickpin in his tie. "What about the woman?" he asked.

Tennell shrugged. "She'll get twenty years. Probably do ten or eleven."

Gaston thought for a moment, then said, "That should be time enough. After ten or eleven years nothing will matter to him except the music. Don't you think?"

"It won't even take that long," Tennell guessed. "Not for him."

Up on the bandstand the men who played traditional went into *Just a Closer Walk with Thee*.

And sitting on the sawdust floor behind the bandstand, old Rainey listened with happy tears in his eyes.





**Robert L. Fish**

## **Don't Worry, Johnny**

The small statuette of blindfolded Justice stood on the side table in her office, flanked by neatly piled legal abstracts. The statuette had been a gift from some colleague; there had been admirers to bestow gifts, she remembered, but somehow they had never given themselves.

She brought her attention back to the parole officer facing her. Johnny, she thought, should have known he couldn't really keep it a secret from her.

The parole officer reached out and crushed his cheap cigar in the ashtray.

"He'll be in trouble again in no time, Miss Benson," he said. His voice recognized the inevitability of trouble with ex-cons; like sunrise and sunset—into prison, out of prison, into prison.

"You say you know the girl?"

"Yes, ma'am. She's a—a tramp."

"What's her name?" A pencil came into her hand automatically.

"Mavis Gallagher. She's got a room at the Glenmont, you want to call it a room. She sure isn't the one to straighten Johnny out. No morals plus expensive tastes."

Like Johnny, Laretta Benson thought. She forced herself to smile enigmatically across the desk, hiding the pain.

"I'm just the boy's lawyer," she said, turning up the palms of her well manicured hands. "Not his guardian."

"I know," the parole officer said, "but I thought I ought to mention it to you." He came to his feet, brushing ash from his wrinkled suit, looking down at her neatly coiffed head with sympathy. "He's wild, Johnny is. You've been more than a lawyer to him, Miss Benson, you been like a mother to him. And it's only because of your defending him in court that he's only been sent up once." He shook his head. "Now the kid's got a record, he won't be so easy to get off in the future."

"I know," she said softly, but she was saying it more for herself than for the officer.

She watched him tug his misshapen hat into place and move to the door, watched him nod and then close the door behind him. She

stared at the blank panel of the door, not seeing it, seeing only Johnny as she had first seen him six years before. She closed her eyes, fighting down the panic that rose at thought of losing him.

More than a lawyer to Johnny? Yes. But a mother? God, no!

It had all started when the court had appointed her to act as Public Defender in the case of the State of New York vs. John Daniels in Juvenile Court on a charge of breaking and entering, plus felonious assault on the elderly woman who had come downstairs to find her small shop being ransacked. Johnny Daniels, age sixteen, orphan. Handsome, reckless, brash—and also amoral, dangerous. And she a respectable lawyer, age thirty-six, a spinster lady, as she called herself wryly, although she had had opportunities. But she had also had a fear of men.

She had arranged bail for the boy and had taken him home to wash up before the trial—at least, he would come into court with clean hands in one respect if not in the other. And Johnny, swaggering into the living room draped only in a towel and asking her if she'd like to help him take his bath!

Her first reaction had been shock, followed by an almost irrational anger, and then there had been the shame of knowing her own desire. Could she possibly lose that fear with this child? This child! She still felt that flush of shame, but also the painful want, as he came up to her, reaching for her almost casually.

"You ain't a bad-looking chick, you know?" he said. "Not bad at all."

They had been lovers for three years. Discreet, but lovers. Under Johnny's expert tutelage—learned where, and when and from whom?—she had come to appreciate the infinite capacity of her still-youthful body. And in return Johnny had his own apartment, his clothes, and an ample allowance which he allowed people to believe came from his skill at gambling.

But Johnny had not been satisfied. He had tried to rob a bank, overlooking the hidden cameras, and despite all of Laretta Benson's ability, Johnny had been convicted by the photographic proof. He had pulled down a big five but had come out in three, being bright, but for those three years her bed had been empty. And now he had come out of prison, outfitted himself in style once again at her expense, and had avoided her.

She had thought it was merely getting accustomed to civilian life but now she had been told it was another woman. She felt ill at the

thought. She came to her feet suddenly, bending to the intercom. "Dorothy?"

"Yes, Miss Benson?" Her personal secretary's voice was incurious.

"I—I'm not feeling well at the moment. I'm going home. I'll take some work with me in case I feel better later on, but please cancel the rest of my appointments for today."

"Yes, Miss Benson." The sympathy subtly changed to a more businesslike tone. "I hope you feel better by tomorrow. You're due in court in the afternoon."

"I know. I'll be there."

She shoved papers in her attaché case like an automaton, closed it with a snap, and let herself out a side door of her office, leading directly to the corridor—she didn't feel like facing her office staff, she didn't feel like facing anyone. The elevator pointer was rising rapidly in her direction; she hesitated one moment and then pushed through to the stairwell. Even the thought of possible commiseration in the eyes of the old elevator man was too much for her at the moment.

She let herself into her dim shade-down apartment, dropping her attaché case, and walked a bit unsteadily toward the sideboard. She poured herself an unaccustomed drink and raised it to her lips with shaking fingers. There was the calculated clearing of a throat from the depths of an easy chair. Her drink jerked and spilled.

Johnny Daniels was smiling at her easily. "Hi, Lorrie."

"Johnny!" She put her glass down shakily. "You startled me!" Her eyes moved about. "How did you get in?"

He raised a thin strip of celluloid casually; his smile was cold.

"You changed the lock since I went away, eh? But you forgot I just graduated college up the river. You ought to double-lock them doors, Lorrie, a smart woman like you—" He tilted his handsome head toward the sideboard. "Go ahead, don't mind me. I'm a couple up on you, anyways."

"I really didn't want a drink." All I wanted, she added silently, was for you to tell me the parole officer was lying; or mistaken. And I only changed the lock because I lost my keys, Johnny, not to keep you out. She walked over to his easy chair and sat down gracefully on the arm, looking down at him possessively, running her fingers through his hair.

He shook her hand away, trying to do it lightly.

"Hey, don't bruise the dandruff. It takes time for that Sing Sing trim to grow out. Give it air."

She tried to smile but it was a grimace. Her hand moved from his hair to stroke his cheek; the contact brought desire against her wish. "Johnny—would you like—?"

He pushed himself from the chair abruptly, almost putting her off balance. He looked down at her, his face expressionless, and shook his head.

"Not today, Josephine. I ain't in the mood."

She knew then it was no mistake. Johnny would never be in the mood again. She forced herself to seeming calmness, walking across the room to a sofa there. She sat down and crossed her legs, aware that her ankles were still trim, her legs still lovely.

"Then what are you doing here?"

Johnny studied her for several minutes, then walked back to his chair and sat down. He leaned toward her.

"I want a favor, Lorrie."

"You want a favor? Another?"

"This will be the last one." There was a final cutting of ties in his tone. "I want an alibi for tomorrow afternoon. One o'clock."

At first the words did not make sense, although after short consideration she realized they had not unduly surprised her. She was beyond surprise; she was rapidly getting beyond hurt.

"You know, Johnny, you never asked me for an alibi before."

The smile was cruel, instantly removed. "I was saving you, Lorrie. For the big one. This is it."

"Why don't you ask your new girl friend to give you your alibi?"

If she hoped to startle him, she failed. Johnny grinned at her derisively. "So you heard about Mavis, huh? Well, what the hell did you expect? I'm young, and so is she." He shrugged. "Anyways, she couldn't alibi a priest. She's got a reputation worse than my own. But you—"

Lauretta Benson felt an almost hysterical urge to laugh.

"Johnny. What makes you think I would alibi you?"

"Because you're a pigeon, Lorrie. Think a bit. You ain't stupid. Think how it would look in the papers, a sixteen-year-old kid seduced by a woman of—" He frowned at her. "What were you then, Lorrie? Forty?"

"Thirty-six," she said faintly.

"You looked older, but never mind," Johnny said. "It's the same thing. A client of yours—juvenile case—poor dumb kid, no relatives,

no mama to teach him better, no experience. Court says you got to defend him. Kid don't know which end is up. You take him home and make him do what you want—because if he don't, you'll see to it he gets the works. Kid got no choice, see? And for three years running." His cold eyes looked at her curiously. "How does it read? Do you want me to draw you a diagram?"

She stared at him, numb with disbelief.

"What do you think?" he asked again. "Picture it in the *Daily News*."

Lauretta Benson took a deep breath. It didn't seem possible this was happening, not to her.

"I would deny it, of course."

Johnny laughed, a genuine laugh.

"You? Man, Lorrie, you come alive for the first time in your life that first time." He chuckled at the memory. "You think nobody noticed? The difference in you, I mean?" She felt her face reddening. Had they noticed, she wondered?

Johnny seemed to read her mind. He leaned forward, a friend. "Lorrie, take my word, you're a lousy liar, especially about how you feel when I just touch you. Don't put it to the test, because you'd lose. Believe me."

Lauretta Benson tried to believe she was actually engaged in this monstrous dialogue.

"I can't alibi you. I've got to be in court tomorrow afternoon."

"So be in court," Johnny said with sudden ease. He took a cigarette from a box on the end table, lit it, and tossed the match carelessly toward an ashtray. "All you got to do is be here at one o'clock, in case the phone rings, or some nosey neighbor happens to be looking this way. After that, do what you want." He shrugged. "The story is I got here at one o'clock on the button, and you had to go to court, like you say, so you left me here. And I hung around for a while and then I got tired of hanging around, so I blew." He smiled at her, her former intransigence forgiven. "I knew you wouldn't let an old pal down."

"Johnny."

"Yeah?" His face hardened, prepared for argument and prepared to deal with it.

"You wouldn't do anything—well, foolish?"

He mimicked her. "No, Johnny, I wouldn't do anything—well, foolish."

He came to his feet, pinched out his cigarette, and slid the black-

ened butt into his pocket, prison-style. He walked to the window and pulled the heavy drapes aside, letting in the late-afternoon light, and then moved to the door. He opened it and stared at her, a sardonic twinkle in his eye.

Lauretta Benson felt as if she were being undressed; her hand tugged at her skirt. Johnny grinned derisively. "Have fun," he said, and winked at her. The door closed quietly behind him.

Through the open curtains the shadows of coming evening enclosed the room; the cries of children in the street filtered past the locked window frames, echoing faintly in the darkening room. She came to her feet slowly and found her way to the sideboard without lighting a lamp, pouring a large whiskey, sipping it gratefully, her mind at work.

An alibi for Johnny tomorrow afternoon at one o'clock or—what? An end to her career? Disgrace? Did it really matter? Could anything she did make her feel more ashamed than she felt at this moment? She sipped the whiskey and then poured another.

She found herself with the classified section of the telephone directory in her hand, searching lists, flipping pages. She reached up and switched on a lamp; in the sudden light the number she wanted seemed to spring at her from the printed page. She took a deep breath and dialed, listening to the telephone at the other end begin to ring.

*Oh, Johnny! Why are you making me do it?*

It was amazing to her, the following afternoon, that her session in court, short as it was, could possibly have passed without the judge noticing her inner conflict, or her opposing attorney—a legal enemy of long standing—both recognizing and taking advantage of her obvious confusion. Obvious to her but apparently not to them. I must be a better actress than I realized, she thought, and paid off the taxi before her apartment door, relieved that the court session had finally been overcome. She tipped accurately and slid from the cab seat to the sidewalk, aware of the driver's admiring glance.

There was a car parked in front of the building, apparently undisturbed by the No Parking sign beside it. She passed it without paying any attention; the three men in the rear seat and the two in front registered on her mind merely as part of the street scene. It was only as she was in the process of taking her keyring from her purse that she became aware of the car door opening and a man

approaching. He seemed to wait until she had found the proper key and then tapped her diffidently on the shoulder.

"Miss Benson?"

She swung about, startled. "Yes?"

"Police." An identification card was held for her inspection. Her eyes automatically swept the car at the curb; Johnny was sitting calmly in the rear seat between two quite-obvious detectives. As she watched, Johnny raised his wrists and shook the handcuffs, grinning at her derisively. She was suddenly aware of the parole officer looking at her sadly from the front seat. She turned abruptly to the detective at her side.

"What trouble is Johnny in?"

He tucked the card carefully back into his wallet. "Could I have a moment of your time, Miss Benson?" He saw the direction of her eyes. "They'll wait. In your apartment?"

Her eyes turned to Johnny's face. He raised his shoulders humorously.

"Of course," she said, and managed the key into the keyhole. She led the way to the stairway and made her way up to the second floor. The detective climbed behind her, his eyes studiously avoiding the trim legs above him. They turned into a corridor and paused before a door.

Lauretta Benson fitted the key into the lock, turning it twice to unlatch it. She swung it open and flicked on a light, staring about, as if something might have changed since she had last seen it; but the room was quiet and neat. She turned, looking at the respectful man behind her.

"I saw your identification card, but I forget your name."

"Sergeant Collier." The sergeant closed the door gently, glancing around the room. His eyes came back to hers. "Miss Benson, would you care to sit down?"

"I'm fine." Her tone was businesslike. "What kind of trouble is Johnny in?"

Sergeant Collier looked at her. "Quite a bit, I'm afraid," he said, and dug into his pocket. "Miss Benson, I'll try and waste a minimum of your time. I want you to look at some photographs."

"Photographs?" She was honestly surprised.

"Three of them." He brought them from his pocket. "Please."

"Of course," she said, and took them. "What am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Just look, please."

She stared at the top one. It showed a typical scene in a bank, except that a crouched man broke the normal harmony. He was holding a revolver, pointing it stiff-armed toward the teller's cage. The teller could not be seen in the picture. The crouched man had a woman's nylon stocking pulled over his head with eyeholes cut in it; he wore gloves and the collar of his windbreaker was pulled to his ears.

In the background a guard had half turned, one foot lifted as if starting in a walking race. Spectators stood with frozen faces; one woman, obviously unaware of what was happening, stood patiently making out a slip at a counter.

Lauretta Benson looked up. "Yes?"

"Would you look at the next picture, please?"

She shifted the top one to the bottom and studied the second photograph. It was the same scene, but taken by a different camera from a different angle. Now the teller was visible; he was twisted unnaturally on the floor behind his cage, his legs drawn up, his hands on his stomach. Lauretta Benson drew in a sharp breath.

"Yes," the sergeant said quietly. "He died an hour ago in White Plains General. In the Emergency." His finger rested on the photograph over her shoulder. "See the clock? One o'clock—that's when it took place. Now, would you please look at the last picture?"

She shifted pictures again. This one seemed to be a duplicate of the first, except in this picture the man did not have the stocking mask on or the gloves. She saw with a start that the man was Johnny, and then realized the picture was both old and familiar. It had been the State's prime evidence at Johnny's trial three years before. Her eyes rose.

"Yes?"

Sergeant Collier looked at her quietly.

"We picked Johnny Daniels up at his apartment about a half hour ago. He was packing. We found a pair of gloves and a lumberjacket jammed down in a rubbish barrel in the basement of his apartment building; they match the ones in the picture. You'll say they're common enough items, and others live in the apartment as well—both true statements. Still . . .

"It's also true we haven't found the gun, or the money. Yet. But we say the man is the same height and build as Johnny Daniels, and that the men in both the picture taken today and the one taken three years ago hold their arms out the same way, stiff, like on a pistol range."



He took a deep breath and continued, "Johnny Daniels says he was here, coming into this apartment, at one o'clock today. We say he was at the Mamaroneck National-Bank at one o'clock, and we say these pictures prove it."

Lauretta Benson remained silent, waiting. Sergeant Collier's eyes were steady on her face.

"Miss Benson, we know you're a friend of Johnny Daniels, and we know you practically adopted him and that you are his lawyer. But we also know you're a respectable member of the bar and an officer of the law yourself. This is a capital offense. Daniels claims he was with you at one o'clock. Is that true?"

She could feel the lash of Johnny's words the day before. She could see him sitting downstairs now, between two detectives. She could hear the threat in his voice.

"Miss Benson?"

She took a deep breath. "It's true, Sergeant. I was on my way out when Johnny came. I told him to go in and make himself comfortable, that I was due in court."

Sergeant Collier's face fell. "That's what he said."

"That's what it was."

The detective frowned. "Miss Benson, are you sure of your times?"

"I'm—well, I suppose nobody is ever too sure, especially in a case like this." Lauretta Benson shrugged diffidently. "If you have any doubts as to the accuracy of my clocks, you're welcome to check them. I remember looking at the one on my bedroom dresser just before I left, and I'm sure it said one o'clock, or a few minutes to one."

Sergeant Collier shrugged helplessly. "I suppose I'd best," he said, and walked from the room looking beaten.

Lauretta Benson wanted a drink but she felt she could hardly take one at this moment. In the silence of the room the ticking of the clock on the mantel seemed to emphasize the alibi she had provided for Johnny Daniels. It was with a slight sense of awakening that she became aware the detective had returned and was addressing her.

"Your bedroom clock checks with my watch, and that's as accurate as the one at the station. And at the bank." He walked to the window, opened it, and leaned out, bellowing "Mike!"

A car door opened and a head poked out. "Yeah?"

"Bring him up!"

Sergeant Collier stood facing the door, his eyes expressionless.

Lauretta Benson wanted a drink more than ever. There was the sound of scuffling feet in the corridor and the two policemen edged their way past the pale woman, bringing Johnny into the room. The parole officer followed, shutting the door behind him. Johnny was half seated, half thrown into an easy chair. He started to remonstrate, then shrugged and subsided.

"You're cute, Johnny," Sergeant Collier said.

Johnny Daniels frowned. He didn't like the tone of voice, the confidence in the detective's voice. He hid his sudden tenseness with belligerency. "She didn't support my alibi?"

"Did I say she didn't?" Sergeant Collier asked. "One o'clock, wasn't it?"

"One o'clock!" Johnny said. "I've only said so a hundred times!"

"Who's arguing with you?" Sergeant Collier looked at his seated prisoner with near-admiration. "You're cool, Johnny. I've got to give you that." He leaned over the prisoner, his voice curious. "Did you really think Miss Benson would cover for you? On a murder charge, Johnny? That was stupid."

"What do you mean? I was here, I tell you!"

"At one o'clock. I'm sure," Sergeant Collier said softly. He held up a wrinkled piece of paper he had been palming in his hand and read it. "*564 Thistlewood Drive. Meet Johnny one o'clock.*"

Lauretta Benson stared. "But that's this address! Where did you get it?"

Sergeant Collier folded the paper carefully and slid it into his billfold. His eyes came up to study Johnny. There was satisfaction in his voice as he spoke to the handsome woman over his shoulder.

"I found it in a pocketbook on the floor of your bedroom, Miss Benson. It apparently belonged to a girl named Mavis Gallagher." He heard the indrawn breath behind him and felt sorry for the further shock he was about to afford her. "I'm sorry, Miss Benson, but she's in your bathroom. Stabbed to death."

Johnny Daniels stared wordlessly across the room, straining against the strong hands of the masklike plainclothes policeman on either side of him. His lean handsome face was pale, outraged.

"Don't worry, Johnny," Lauretta Benson said soothingly. "I've always taken care of you, and I'll see to it you're taken care of this time. Don't worry, Johnny."

# Michael Gilbert

## Back in Five Years

In the early Thirties, while I was a junior Inspector attached to the uniformed branch in a North London division, there were a number of known counterfeiters at work in London. I don't mean that we knew their names and addresses, for they tend to be shy people, but a surprising number of facts about them and their products were filed and tabulated at the Criminal Records Office and in the M.O. file.

There were forgers of Post Office Savings books, and there were those who specialized in passports and share certificates. But the kings of the trade were the forgers and utterers of banknotes. And the king of them all was a certain shy, unobtrusive genius who manufactured the "Beauties."

His identity was, of course, a mystery. He was known to us only by his pound notes, finely etched and most scrupulously printed.

In a lot of ways they were a better product than the stuff being turned out by H.M. Mint. That young lady who sits up in an inset in the top left-hand corner (on the genuine pound notes she looks rather a pudding-faced young person)—well, in his productions she was a miracle of dignified beauty. That's why we called them "Beautiful Britannias," or "Beauties."

And you can take it from me that there wasn't a policeman in the Metropolis who wouldn't have given his belt and buttons for a chance to lay hands on the artist.

However, as it happens—and as it happens in most police work—it wasn't one man or even a few men who got on the track of the forger. When this happy event finally came to pass it was the result of a combination of luck and instinct backed up by the hard, slogging work of a great number of people.

We had regretfully decided that in the case of the Beauties we were up against one of those rarities in the field of crime—an entirely solitary and single-handed operator; a man with at least one godlike attribute, the strength which is said to come from loneliness.

He must have made his own plate—it may have taken him a year or more of patient trial and error, cutting, smoothing, and sizing.

He even had a rotation system which enabled him to change the numbering.

But it was his method of distribution that put him at the top of the class.

Having printed a number of very excellent pound notes, he rationed himself to about twenty a week. These he would cash personally, going to shops and post offices all over London, and never to the same one twice. He would purchase some small object costing not more than a few pence or a shilling, pay with a pound note, and pocket the change.

The system was laborious, but almost foolproof. And, but for one small thing, I really have my doubts whether we should have got onto him.

The thing was, he had a weakness for pawnbrokers. Perhaps it was because pawnbrokers' shops are places which have a wide variety of things you can pick up for a small sum; and they are usually rather dark and not very crowded and don't make difficulties about change. Anyway, it proved his undoing.

For pawnbrokers, as you may know, are people who like to work very closely with the police. There's nothing underhanded about it. It just happens to pay both sides. There's a Pawnbrokers' List of Stolen Articles which we publish at Scotland Yard, and most pawnbrokers make a practice of reporting anything suspicious to the local station. The local police, in return, keep a special eye on their shops, which are a tempting target to the light-fingered fraternity.

Well, over the months and years, reports piled up of these pound notes being received by pawnbrokers. So, just on the chance (that's a phrase which features pretty prominently in police work), a letter was sent round to all pawnbrokers saying that if they should happen to notice a man or woman coming into their shop who wasn't a regular customer, and who wanted to make a small purchase and proffered a brand-new pound note for it, then would they please make a careful note of his description, etc., etc.

After a time the descriptions started to add up. It was extraordinarily fascinating, sitting back in an office watching a living person being built up out of fractions, watching his features line themselves in, and his identity declare itself.

We got a picture of a man, middle-sized to small, plump, soft-spoken, with white, pudgy hands, strong black hair, and weak, rather peering eyes. His clothes naturally varied from time to time and from place to place but the essentials were the same.

A very wide and elaborate net was then spread. I won't bore you with all the details, but you can gather the scope of it when I tell you it meant stationing policemen within call of almost every pawnshop which had not yet been visited and arranging a simple system of signals with the pawnbrokers themselves.

And that was how, at the beginning of June, 194—, the police at last caught sight of Mr. Mountjoy and followed him discreetly home to 14 Malpas Street. This proved to be a small shop in North London, with living quarters attached, and an independent flat over it.

Some further facts now came to light. All seemed to point to the one conclusion. To start with, Mr. Mountjoy's business was that of a one-man printer and typemaker; very suitable, we felt, allowing its owner to possess and operate various small machines and lathes without exciting suspicion. Then again, he was a solitary man, who, according to Mr. Crump, of 12 Malpas Street, his nearest neighbor, spent much of his time out of his shop, apparently on journeys round London.

"Looking for commissions, I expect," said Mr. Crump. "Not that he seems to get much work. Manages to do very well for himself, nonetheless."

I was in charge of these local inquiries and, sensing a certain amount of rancor in that last remark, I guessed that there might be some trade rivalry. Mr. Crump was a news-agent and printer himself. However, he was unable to help me much, because he didn't know very much. But he did say that Mr. Mountjoy seemed to do a lot of work at night.

In some trepidation, because we didn't want to expose our hand too soon, I tried Mrs. Ireland, who lived in the flat over Mr. Mountjoy's shop. She was a middle-aged party, intensely respectable and slightly deaf. I visited her one morning in the well worn guise of an inspector of gas meters and found her surprisingly willing to talk.

She, unlike Mr. Crump, had the very highest opinion of Mr. Mountjoy. Possibly he *was* one who kept himself to himself but there was no harm that she could see in that. Better than clumping about sticking your nose into what didn't concern you. This, I gathered, was a back-hander at Mr. Crump, whom she didn't like. Unfortunately, her deafness prevented her from being able to corroborate the story of night work.

Well, there it was. You now know all that we knew at that point and you can see how we were fixed. I had no doubt in my mind. The

description fitted. The setup was exactly what we had imagined. The printer's shop—the night work—the journeys round London.

There was only one thing to do—take a search warrant and chance the odds.

Accordingly, on Midsummer Day, 194—, just after four o'clock in the afternoon, I took Sergeant Husband with me and walked over to Malpas Street to put the matter to the test. And as I turned into the road, the first thing that struck my eye was that damned notice and I realized that we had missed our man. How narrowly we had missed him became apparent as we pursued our inquiries.

The notice? It was pinned to the door of the shop. Written in a copperplate hand on a neat white card, it said: *Back in Five Years*.

No. 14 was the end house of a block of seven. It had the shop entrance in front and an independent side entrance which led up to Mrs. Ireland's flat.

Now the curious thing was this. Five minutes before we had arrived, several people had seen Mr. Mountjoy come out and pin that notice on his door. But after that no one could say which way he had gone. This didn't all come out at once, but inquiries in the street, then and later, only deepened the mystery.

For instance, Mrs. Ireland had been sitting at her window, which overlooked the point where the side street joined the main. Although she might be deaf, she certainly wasn't shortsighted and she happened to have been keeping her eyes open for the postman. She was prepared to swear that Mr. Mountjoy had neither passed the end of the side road nor gone down it.

Suppose, therefore, he had turned to the left outside his front door? But Mr. Crump in No. 12, and the barber in No. 8 had both been in their shops the whole time and were positive that he had not gone past them.

Had he gone back into his shop or the living room behind it? But these were most undeniably empty, and had, besides, the sort of "packed-up" appearance of rooms whose owner has left them deliberately. The gas and electricity were turned off, the larder was empty.

There was a door leading into the garden, and this was locked. That by itself didn't prove anything, of course, but the garden was a dead end. There was a very high, glass-bottle-topped wall on the street side, the blank elevation of another house at the end, and a garden full of little Crumps on the right.

Mr. Mountjoy, in fact, had walked into the street, pinned up his famous notice, and then dematerialized.

But, unlike the conjurer's lady assistant, he not only disappeared, he stayed disappeared. And that is not such an easy thing to do—not in this country, anyway, especially when the police are on the lookout for you and have your full description.

However, as with everything else, Mr. Mountjoy managed it competently enough.

The police force, like the Army, believes in moving its executives around, and it wasn't until well over four years later—nearly five—that I found myself back at the same North London police station, attached this time to the plainclothes branch.

One of the first places I visited was Malpas Street, and there, still, was the notice: *Back in Five Years*.

In a district like that you'd have imagined that it would have been torn down long ago. But it hadn't.

I gathered, in fact, that it had become a sort of local tradition. Mr. Mountjoy had always been a mystery man to the neighborhood, and his reputation had been nowise diminished by his dramatic disappearance and the interest of the police in his whereabouts.

There was a strong local feeling, amounting almost to an obsession, that five years after his disappearance (on the very day and at the very hour) Mr. Mountjoy would reappear and take that notice down again.

What would happen then no one could suggest.

I asked the station sergeant about the place. For instance, why hadn't it been relet or taken over by the authorities? Mr. Mountjoy, I gathered, owned the building but the taxes must be mounting up and anyway it was a nice little shop and living quarters. We didn't talk about requisitioning in those days, but we had some powers. Apparently, however, all this had been foreseen by Mr. Mountjoy.

The day before he disappeared he had handed to Mrs. Ireland a sum in notes (genuine ones this time) sufficient to deal with all foreseeable expenses *for exactly five years*. At the end of that time, he said, if he hadn't come back she could sell the house and keep the proceeds. And he had even executed a legal document enabling her to do this.

In short, she was to wait for him for five years, and at the end of that time, like the frog in the fairy story, she was to have her reward—unless the fairy prince had reappeared to claim his own.

It sounded pretty fantastic to me.

The next thing that happened, about three weeks later, was the arrival at the station of a badly worried Mr. Crump, with a tale that No. 14 was haunted.

He was so clear about it that we gave more attention to his story than the police usually accord to psychic manifestations. Also, of course, we were interested in that particular house.

"Scraping, cutting, and emery-papering," said Mr. Crump, his great red face moist but earnest. "Every night—about midnight or one o'clock. Just like he used to. I don't like it. Nor the wife don't like it. She's talking of moving if it isn't stopped."

"Did you go down and look in?" I asked. "Was there a light on in the shop?"

"Of course there wasn't no light on," said Mr. Crump. "Hasn't the electricity been cut off? I've told you, it's not yooman, this noise isn't."

When I suggested that it might be rats, I thought Mr. Crump was going to detonate, so I hurriedly promised him we'd look into it and he departed.

We had the keys of the shop, so I let myself in that evening, going after dark to avoid causing any undue stir. I took a torch and made a thorough investigation. It was obvious no one had been there. The dust was inches thick over everything, and the place—well, it *smelt* deserted, if you know what I mean.

When I came out I found half Malpas Street gathered outside armed with sticks and bottles. Apparently a small boy had seen my torch flashing and the crowd were just summoning up courage to break in and lay the ghost when I stepped out.

After that, of course, there was no stopping the stories.

Mr. Crump appeared about a month later with an ultimatum.

Either the police "did something" or he was going to clear out himself. He couldn't stand it any longer. His wife had already gone on an indefinite visit to her married sister and trade was falling off. The sinister reputation of No. 14 was beginning to corrupt No. 12.

"All right," I said at last. "I'll come along myself tonight and we'll both listen."

When I came off duty at about half past ten that evening, I walked along to Malpas Street and Mr. Crump let me in. We sat in his parlor, which was on the first floor overlooking the street, and we drank beer and talked for a bit, and at midnight, at my suggestion,



we turned the lights out and made ourselves comfortable in chairs near the window.

After a bit I must have dozed, because I woke up to feel Mr. Crump gripping my arm.

He said nothing, but I gathered from his breathing, which he was trying to control, that something had happened.

Then, in the stuffy blackness of the room, I heard it, too. It was a thin intermittent burr, which sounded like a very sharp edge cutting across some tough substance. Then came the sound of scraping, and then the cutting started again.

I jumped up, leaped at the door, nearly broke my neck on the stairs, and three seconds later I was out in the street. I had my key at the ready and I snapped open the door of No. 14 and switched on my torch.

There was no one there. Nothing had been disturbed at all. There wasn't even the trace of a rat or mouse paw in the dust. I hadn't thought that there would be. There had been something indefinably human about that sound.

When I got back to Mr. Crump, I found he had turned on the light and poured out some more beer. He seemed much more cheerful. I think that half his trouble had been that no one believed his story.

Also, as we were finishing our beer, he said something which surprised me.

"Thanks be," he said. "I've only to put up with it for one more week."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Work it out for yourself," he said. "It's the seventeenth of June. Four years and fifty-one weeks ago he left. Said he'd be back in five years. Very methodical man was Mr. Mountjoy."

I could find no comment to make.

It was quite illogical and fantastic, and I felt that we were making fools of ourselves, but in the end I agreed, weakly, to post two sergeants to watch the back of the house while I kept an unobtrusive eye on the front.

If Mr. Mountjoy was going to maintain his reputation for punctuality, he was due in the street at four o'clock in the afternoon. Accordingly, at five to four I turned the corner at the far end of the road and started strolling nonchalantly toward No. 14, stopping every now and then to look in at the various shop windows.

It was a true midsummer day, warm and windless, and the chil-

dren were still in school, so that by Malpas Street standards it was almost quiet.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was just short of four o'clock. And Malpas Street was still most definitely empty.

At that moment, in the warm summer silence, I heard it again. I want to be quite clear about this. It was exactly and undeniably the same sound that I had heard that night when I sat up over Mr. Crump's shop. But it did not come from No. 14.

It was from the same side of the street but much lower down.

I moved cautiously along until I could locate it. It came from the barber's shop at No. 8, where Toni Etrillo, the barber, was shaving one of his swarthy compatriots. The burr and the rasp as the razor passed across the strong black stubble—these were unmistakable.

And in that moment the secret of Mr. Mountjoy's disappearance became as abundantly clear to me.

The first thing I did was purely symbolical. I took out my knife and levered out the tack which held up that notice. I was about to tear it up, but thought better of it and dropped it in my pocket.

Conscious that a dozen pairs of eyes were watching from curtained windows, I went round into the side street and rang Mrs. Ireland's doorbell.

When she opened the door I didn't do anything dramatic; I just beckoned her out into the street and signaled to one of the sergeants to accompany us, and we all walked back to the police station.

For the greater part of the way we were silent, but I felt, in justice, that one thing had to be said.

"A marvelously well-kept-up impersonation, Mr. Mountjoy. It's nothing new for a man to dress as a woman, and I have even heard of cases before where a landlord became his own lodger. But—it's a great mistake for any man to do his shaving last thing at night."



Robert McNear

## Death's Door

I read from the oil-company travel guide: "Blackrock is the northernmost community on the peninsula. Here you get the feeling of a true fishing center among the anchored fishing boats and nets reeled out to dry. Off Blackrock lies the Porte des Morts, a strait six miles wide separating mainland Wisconsin and Nicolet Island. In 1679, about 300 Potawatomi Indians drowned in a sudden storm while crossing the water to engage the Winnebagos. The tragedy was witnessed by explorers La Salle and De Tonti, who named the strait Porte des Morts, or Death's Door. Today it is said the strait contains more shipwrecks per square mile than any other area in the Great Lakes."

I folded the travel guide and put it in the glove compartment. Sitting there in my car, on the last leg of my journey, my immediate impression was that the waters were a lure for the local Chamber of Commerce to attract visitors, a thrill for these station-wagon travelers at seeing so sinister a place, a pool for skindivers in which to explore old wrecks.

Porte des Morts: Death's Door. It seemed very commonplace this late afternoon: a desolate little landing deep in the snow, a weatherbeaten smokehouse whose door moved open and shut with the wind; a timber dock where a veteran ferryboat—the *R. L. Ostenson*, Nicolet Island, Wisconsin—creaked patiently on its hawsers. Beyond that was the bleak strait—sky the color of worn steel and bay the same, hinged by the horizon line and identical except for the dark channel of water out through the ice.

I like forgotten, half populated places, almost-deserted cubbyholes of the world. I suppose that's one of the reasons I stay on as a reporter for a small-town newspaper instead of going to Chicago and becoming a well-known journalist.

I'd been waiting in the car for about five minutes when the hunch-backed deckhand turned up. He came half skipping from the dock, thumb up, to motion me out of the car. I got out in the ankle-deep snow, saying, unnecessarily, "You'll take her on?" He swung into the driver's seat and slammed the door for an answer.

Great! I liked every bit of it. Only in some out-of-the-way place

like this would you find a hunchbacked deckhand who—I had got a good look at him—had fine golden hair and an almost-perfect Botticelli face. He took the car carefully across the planking and onto the deck while I, bothered by the usual curiosity, had to walk across the road to the smokehouse and look inside. No fire had burned there for months, but the ghost of smoke and fish possessed the place completely. It was so dark that I could see little except the small drift of snow that had come in through the door. Now, one of my itches is about doors—I can't stand to see them open when they should be shut, or idly swinging, like this one; so I closed it tight, for this winter, at least.

Then I took myself aboard the ferryboat, climbed the stairs, and came to the door of the passenger lounge. I'd felt almost alone until now, but there were about ten people sitting around, smoking, drinking coffee, waiting. It looked like a roadside diner, with plywood booths along the walls and a couple of scarred tables in the center. It looked stifling in there, so I turned away from the door and made my way along the railing to the pilothouse door.

Inside the pilothouse, leaning on the wheel and smoking a cigarette as he gazed at the car deck below, was a youngish, long-jawed man with pepper-and-salt hair, who, in spite of the ordinary wind-breaker and dungarees he wore, was obviously the captain. On his head he had an old-fashioned officer's cap with a brass plate above the bill. It read: CAPTAIN. I watched him douse the cigarette, straighten up, and signal down to the hunchback on the deck. A floodlight went on down there.

The hunchback and a teenage boy moved around quickly to cast off. The captain tugged twice at a cord on the compressed-air horn, bouncing two blasts off the snow-shrouded face of Blackrock. Then he pulled the engine telegraph to reverse and I could feel the deck plates vibrate as the ferry backed away from the wharf. The skin of ice crushed under the black-steel hull as we moved out to swing around slowly into the channel. *Bon Voyage, R. L. Ostenson.*

In those few minutes the pale daylight had gone completely; and now, looking out across the strait, I saw an early moon laying a yellow path almost directly alongside the channel through the ice of the Porte des Morts. At the end of the double line I could see the low fishback of Nicolet Island. "Strange place, the island," Ed Kinney had said back in Green Bay. "Isolated, ingrown, maybe two hundred people, fifty families. Swedes, Icelanders, Germans. They don't warm much to strangers. Lots of superstition."

Kinney has been a feature editor for a long time and he can't help talking like that. Still, he used to summer on the island and I didn't doubt the truth of what he said. "Trouble is," he added, "there's nothing to be superstitious about. In winter the island's about as exciting as the lobby of the Northland Hotel at two o'clock of a Sunday morning. You'll see 'em all come out of hibernation for that basketball game. Then they go back into it for the rest of the winter."

Blackrock had slowly receded into the distance and the last lonely peninsula pine had faded astern. I realized that the sharp wind had got through my overcoat and that I was beginning to shiver. Just then the wheelhouse door opened and the nasal voice of the captain said, "So softhearted I can't stand to see even a damn fool freeze to death. C'mon in, friend."

I stepped inside. "Thanks, Captain. It was like a fresh and gentle breeze of May. You are speaking to a man who has covered the Green Bay Packers Sunday in and Sunday out for four winters."

"Hey, a reporter!" he said, smiling. We shook hands. "I'm Axel Ostenson. Now, why d'you figure Vince Lombardi had to go and retire? Those boys ain't been the same since."

"Even the iron men wear out in time," I said. At this point the radio squawked and he went over to say something into a microphone about position and time of arrival. I looked around.

All was neat and newly painted—up front near the window, the wheel and the engine telegraph, the captain's high stool. A padded bench ran the length of the pilothouse. Framed on the walls were some Great Lakes shipping charts, a safety-inspection certificate, and a plaque informing me that the Sturgeon Bay Shipbuilding Company had created this noble vessel. Ostenson finished with the radio.

"You remember Ed Kinney?" I asked. "He's my editor on the *News* down in Green Bay."

"Sure do. Used to have a summer place on the island. I taught his boy Gene how to sail."

"Ed thought I ought to cover the Door County championship game this year. First one on Nicolet Island since 1947. Ed thought there might be a good feature story in it, along with the play-by-play. I thought maybe you could help me, so I thought I'd ask you a few questions—"

"Nuremberg, Germany," he said.

"What's that?"

"Missed it. I was in Nuremberg, Germany, with the Tenth Division in 1947."

"But you must have heard a lot of talk since about—"

"I'm sorry, mister, but you know the Great Lakes maritime regulations say that I'm not supposed to have anybody who don't belong in the pilothouse. I'm gonna have to ask you to go along to the lounge. You get yourself a Coke or a cuppa coffee." He didn't look at me, but kept staring straight ahead as I went out."

Queer how suddenly the Great Lakes maritime regulations got enforced.

I moved along the rail to about midship. The wind was like a cold blade on my face, but I wanted to give myself just a few more minutes before I had to go into the stuffy, smoke-filled saloon where I knew that, in spite of myself, I'd drink at least three or four cups of bad coffee to pass the time. So I'd cut the taste of that with something better. I groped in the inside pocket of my overcoat and found the oblong shape of my flask. The bourbon built a comfortable small fire in my throat and my innards.

I stared down at the black edge of water alongside the hull and the thick shelf of ice. In the moonlight the strait was one vast skating rink. Every now and then a chunky little berg came scraping along the hull as we passed. I wondered what might happen if the *R. L. Ostenson* didn't go back and forth from Blackrock to the island twice a day. How long would it take before the channel froze over solid? But, I supposed, even at that, the island could hardly be cut off. With this kind of freeze, the iceboats—those craft with runners and sails or motor—could make it back and forth without the slightest trouble.

Speak of the Devil, I thought. It was just about then that I heard the motor. I took another sip and peered ahead into the dark. Funny that somebody would be running one of those things this time of evening. There was more spray now than there had been and it stung my forehead and fogged my glasses. There seemed to be an area of low-lying mist on the ice ahead.

I took my glasses off and gave them a good wipe with my handkerchief. The motor noise got no louder; it was still a low chugga-chugga-chugga, like something I remembered out of my boyhood. I leaned over the rail and strained my eyes toward the sound. I saw one red eye in the gray cotton fog.

Then, gradually, as we overtook it, the thing took shape just at the far reach of glimmer from our deck lights. No iceboat, but a

black, sign-bedecked Model A Ford, bumping along at maybe ten or fifteen miles an hour. Running boards, spare tire on the rear, dim yellow headlights on the ice. It looked just like the one my dad used to own back when. Only Dad would never have let anybody violate the glossy black finish with signs like, HOLD ME TIGHT, BABY and BEAT FISH CREEK and THERE AIN'T NO FLIES ON THE N.I.S. Bent backward in the wind was a radio aerial from which flew a green pennant that read in block letters, NICOLET ISLAND.

I leaned as far over the rail as I could and, as the old car came abreast of me and then gradually began to drop astern, I tried to make out the faces of the kids inside. It was too dark for much more than silhouettes. However, I did raise my arm and wave to them. And I swear that I saw somebody waving back from the rear seat. Then the yellow headlight beams grew dimmer, the chugga-chugga dropped back out of earshot, and we'd lost them.

Funny, I thought. I'd hate to have any kids of mine out on the ice on a freezing night like this one. But I supposed that people up here had different ideas. They probably drove over to Blackrock—when the ice was thick enough—as casually as we'd go down to the drug-store in Green Bay.

Anyway, it was an interesting little incident, probably not the usual thing to the average Wisconsin newspaper reader. I thought I'd pin it down a little more and use it somewhere in the feature. "Up around Nicolet Island, some strange things are taken as a matter of course," my lead might go. "As I was crossing over on the ferryboat last night, I saw . . ."

I made my way along the railing until I'd come back to the pilothouse door. Ostenson was still at the wheel, as if he hadn't moved since I'd left. I went on in. He glanced at me.

"Captain, I guess you saw those kids out on the ice in the old car back there just a bit. Heading over to the island. Is that a fairly common thing up here? Couldn't the kids get into trouble?"

He didn't reply. He swung his whole head around toward me, his face perfectly immobile and his gray fish-scale eyes staring. Then he looked back at his course and was silent for nearly a minute.

At last he said quietly, "It happens." Then, in a louder voice, he commanded, "Come here!" I walked over. "Open your mouth and breathe out," he said. He waited a moment. Then he said, "Liquor drinking on this ship is against the law. I could file a complaint against you and get you fined. You hear that?"

"Come off it, Cap," I said. "It's just a drop to keep the old blood flowing."

"Maybe," he said in a cold voice. "But I could testify that you barged into my pilothouse and I had to order you out. Then you spent some time drinking liquor somewhere. Then you came back into the pilothouse against my orders. Mister, this may be just a dinky little Great Lakes ferryboat, but the captain is still the law on it. Now, you go back and sit down in the passenger cabin and shut up."

I made my disconsolate way back to the cabin. What in the world had gone wrong with the moron in the pilothouse? He'd seemed perfectly friendly until—I couldn't figure out what came after the "until." I sat down at one of the tables in the middle of the cabin. A burly man with a blond mustache and wearing a thick mackinaw looked up from across the table. He pointed at a half full bottle of rye whiskey and a paper cup. "Drink?" he asked.

I looked around. Just about every table had a pint or a fifth on it. Obviously not a temperance ship. Just when I was going to ask mackinaw-mustache about the captain, I decided better. If Kinney's two paragraphs were any guide to the island, this chap was probably the captain's older brother, or at least a first cousin. Probably just Ostenson's quirk; he must have suddenly decided that he didn't like my face.

I was on deck again to observe our landing. The dark form of the island was very close now and I could see lights farther up the channel. They seemed to outline the dock. We passed a channel buoy frozen in the ice at a drunken tilt and wearing a snowy beard.

The wind swept in from the lake, even harsher and stronger than before, then calmed a little as we came in. The engine went half speed, then silent; and came on loud again in reverse. I saw the wooden pilings of the dock, illuminated by a hanging string of yellow bulbs.

I heard a shoe scrape on the stairway behind me and I turned.

It was the hunchback, just starting down to the deck: "I seen 'em, too," he said in a low voice.

"The kids in the car?" I said. "Yeah, what about it?"

"It's the old team," he whispered. "It's the old team still tryin' to make it." He was suddenly scuttling down the stairs to his duty with the ropes.

Clannish, inbred—but Ed Kinney had forgotten to tell me that I might run into some slightly loony ones, too . . .



Comfortable, warm, old-fashioned; and presumably by the side of the lake, Lakeside Cottages struck me as a good omen. I was the only guest, yet a neat path had been shoveled from the lodge down to my small cabin (Number Nine) and a boy named Roger Nelson carried my bags. He turned the lights on and showed me where the radio was.

"Are you visiting up here?" he asked. "I wouldn't want to be nosey, but we almost never get an overnight guest in the winter."

"No. I'm a reporter. I came up a day early, but I'm really here to cover the big game tomorrow night."

"That's great," he said, smiling. "You from *Life*?"

"No, just from Green Bay, I'm afraid." He handed me my key.

"I'm one of the assistant basketball managers," he said. "Means I carry stuff around a lot—though you'd never guess it from the important-sounding title."

"I won't tell a single soul in Green Bay what you *really* do," I said. He started to leave. "Well, good luck against Fish Creek," I said.

He smiled and shook his head. "It's Ephraim," he said. "The game's against Ephraim. Fish Creek wasn't even in the running this year."

"Of course. How could I be so forgetful? Good luck against Ephraim," I said. He smiled again and closed the door behind him.

Sure, it was Ephraim Bay. We'd even had a feature story on Kevin O'Hara, their six-foot-six, high-scoring center. Why had I said Fish Creek? I lay on the bed with a couple of fingers of whiskey in the bathroom tumbler, blowing fancy smoke rings. Then it came back to me. Simple.

The kids crossing the ice in the old car had BEAT FISH CREEK painted on its side. The slogan was probably a leftover from the baseball or football season.

After a while I stirred myself and got the notebook from my jacket pocket. First I'd get something to eat, then I'd get in a little work on the background for the feature story. I found the page with my notes on the briefing Ed Kinney had given me. On the second page, with a star beside it, was the name "Edward Maier."

"Ed coach fr abt ten yrs. Now retired. One of the best small-school coaches in state. Runner-up three, four years in row, then champion team around 1947. Small town wild abt basketball. Maybe 60 kids in the high school, 59 of 'em bb players. Tall Swedes. Local disaster sometime in 40's or 50's. School fire? Anyway, several children died, including team members. Quick check in our files draws blank, but

ask Ed, who will know all abt it." There were several other entries, but I decided to try Maier first.

There were all of four pages in the phonebook. Edward Maier's number was a quaint 32-B. Then I had to turn the crank on the phone to ring the operator. I was back in the 1920's. "Please give me 32-B," I said.

"There's somebody staying at Lakeside," I heard the operator say to somebody with her. "He's calling Ed Maier." Then I heard her say, "How should I know why he wants to talk to Ed?"

"Operator honey," I said in my coziest voice. "My name is Charley Pope. I'm a sports reporter on *The Green Bay News*. I get a hundred and thirty dollars a week. I'm forty years old, six-foot-one, one hundred and eight-five pounds, married, and the father of two. I'm here to cover the game tomorrow night. And now, operator honey, please ring Ed Maier for me."

"Well, it's nice meeting you, Mr. Pope!" she said. "We don't get many visitors in the wintertime." I heard a whispered aside to her friend, "Newspaperman, and he sounds real nice. No, I *don't* know why he's calling Ed Maier."

When she finally did get the call through, there was an answer almost immediately at the other end. It sounded like a hiccup.

"Is this Mr. Ed Maier? I'm up here to cover—" and I went on through my introduction. There was silence for almost a minute.

I knew that Ed Maier was still conscious, though, because I could hear a deep and regular breathing over the line. "Listen, Mr. Maier," I finally said, "if it's more convenient I can come over to see you tomorrow. But I'd rather make a short call this evening, if it's okay."

More deep breathing. Then he spoke one word in a hoarse voice. "Hurry!" And he hung up.

Thumbtacked to the wall of my cottage was a postcard-sized map of the island. I studied it until I thought I'd worked out my route from Lakeside to Town Line Road, where Maier lived. It was now almost seven. I'd talk with the old boy for about an hour and try to get back to get some dinner around eight. I went out to my car.

The map was probably okay, but the snow and the scarcity of signs tricked me, because the next one I saw read GUNNAUGSSON ROAD, which was a dirt road that didn't appear on the map at all. I wandered from that onto another road that turned out to be Detroit Harbor Road. This did appear on the map, running the length of the island south to north. My only trouble was that I didn't know which way was north. After a couple of miles of rough going through the

snow, a red-neon savior gleamed out of the dark. God bless Gus's Bar. Eats, Beer, Mixed Drinks.

And there they both were, just as advertised. The one—massive, old-fashioned, dark wood; and the other, behind it—massive, old-fashioned barkeep. A jukebox was sobbing at the top of its voice when I went in.

"Ed Maier?" said the bartender, shaking his head slowly, as if this were just too much. He mopped the bar for a while. "Ed Maier," he finally said reluctantly, "you mean *coach* Ed Maier?"

"Yes, I mean *coach* Ed Maier on Town Line Road. Can you tell me how to get there?"

"Guess I could," he said. He started to polish some glass beer steins. "What do you want with him?"

"I want to offer him a job in the movies," I said. "Now, where do I find him?"

"Well," said Gus reflectively, "when you go out the door, point yourself right. Go about twenty-five yards. Then go left on Town Line right down to the very end. That's where Coach lives."

As I was going out the door he said, "If you're a reporter on the Green Bay paper and you get a hundred thirty dollars a week, how come you tell people you can get them in the movies?"

"How come you sell poisoned beer?" I asked and left.

But the directions were right, anyway. I found Maier's ramshackle little cottage in a winter-bare birch grove. There was a pile of firewood outside the front door, a little drift of smoke from the chimney, and a dim light inside the window. The door opened even before I could get out of the car.

Ed Maier was one of those people who look about thirty from a distance of twenty yards. Blond hair combed straight back, very fair skin, athletic build, and no pot. At half the distance he had added ten years, maybe fifteen. He wore high boots, heavy pants, and a plaid windbreaker. You began to see the creases in his face, the jowls, the round-shouldered middle age in his stance.

When you got right up there to shake hands, you saw, by the lamplight in the doorway, the undertaker's next. Or at least that was the way he struck me at the moment. The blue eyes were glazed. The face was a Rand McNally of varicose veins. The flesh looked like puff paste. Ed Maier seemed to be the victim of one of those diseases that age a man too rapidly.

He invited me in and offered me coffee. He had two cups ready and one of those old conical coffeepots steaming on one of the hot

flagstones of the hearth. On the littered table there was a plate with some thick slices of bread and cheese. I made myself a sandwich and sat across from him in a rocker near the fire. I meant to ask him why he'd said "Hurry!" that way, but I didn't quite know how to put it.

He began, "Well, you can quote me as saying that we've had a great season. No, sir, I won't be coy about that. The boys have marvelous spirit and we've been getting near onto seventy percent of the rebounds. Thank Red Hockstader for that. Six-four and a natural for All-State. Best center I've ever coached."

"But, Coach," I said gently, "I've never heard of Red Hockstader. The Nicolet Island center is a kid named Kris Holmsund."

"Think I don't know that?" said the old man. "I thought you said you wanted to talk about the championship team. That was 1947."

I would have sworn that the brew in his coffee cup came more from Kentucky than Brazil. He took a long swig.

"They really had her fixed up," he said. "The old American Legion Hall. Flags, bunting, more smorgasbord than you ever seen in your life. Couple of barrels of beer. Band all in new uniforms. Vee for victory. Big sign read, WELCOME TO OUR CHAMPS. Broke my heart." He drifted off into silence. "They were all my boys. Just like sons."

I wasn't getting anywhere. We were drifting pretty aimlessly in the old man's memory, though we seemed to be skirting the edge of that disaster—school fire or whatever it was—Kinney had told me to check on. I made a guess and tried again.

"So they never showed up at the American Legion Hall for the victory celebration? Is that the way it was, Coach? Remind me just how it happened, will you?"

I poured myself some more coffee and made another cheese sandwich. The fire burned hot in the fireplace, but so many of the windowpanes were broken and patched with cardboard that I kept feeling an intermittent draft.

"My wife Julia was alive then. The whole thing broke her up terrible. And Sally run off to Milwaukee and married a bum. Drunken bum, I heard. Not that I've even thought of her for twenty years."

Now we were really lost in the fog. Might as well give it up for tonight, I thought—but decided to try once more. "Coach, tell me how it all came about. What happened first that led up to—?"

He nodded. "Well," he said patiently, as if repeating an oft-told tale, "you know we won by four points in the overtime. And when

we got back to Blackrock, the ferryboat was late. No sign of her. And all the boys crazy mad to get back to the celebration. And me half out of my head myself, I guess.

"Well, anyhow, I said wait. Red said no. *He* was going to drive it alone. I said he was a damn fool. He said it wasn't snowing. I said it was going to any minute and though the ice was thick enough, still there were probably weak spots in it here and there. So I took him out back of the smokehouse where the others couldn't hear, and I talked Red out of it. Thought so. Then I went down the road to a house to use the telephone. When I came back the whole damn team had left. It was beginning to snow then—"

I suddenly understood the old tragedy of Nicolet Island. The champions were all dead, the triumphant team wiped out. But, of course, it was a lot more than that. Everybody on the island was related to one or more of the seven or eight boys on the team. But something was bothering me and I had to explode.

"Why in God's name, then, do the people of this place still let their kids toot around on the ice in old cars? You'd think they'd learn something from what happened. Why, just tonight, coming over, I saw another bunch in a car, chugging along across the strait."

As the old coach stared at me, the merciful potion from his coffee cup began to take hold. The lids seemed to fall over his eyes like the lids of a doll's eyes, pulled down by gravity. His head slowly sank to his forearm and he was silent.

"Coach?" I said experimentally. He didn't move. I debated whether or not to haul him off to his bed, but then I guessed that he probably spent a good many winter nights in the old easy chair in front of the dying fire—and the ancient phrase was a perfect literal description—in his cups.

I got into bed early and opened my book. I'd brought along Alan Moorehead's *The White Nile*, which I'd been saving to read and which now seemed to me a good, faraway kind of thing to dissipate all the nonsense I'd encountered that afternoon. Because now, in a quiet moment, it seemed to me that the whole business was nonsensical. And by the time I got sleepy enough to turn out the light, I'd succeeded. I was deep in Tanganyika with Livingstone.

I was shaving the next morning when I heard a knock at the cabin door. "Come in," I yelled, and Roger Nelson pushed open the door.

Hearty good mornings on both sides. I was feeling refreshed and hungry. "How are the pancakes up there at the lodge?" I asked.

"Great," he said. "But you've got an invitation to breakfast—out. Mr. Ostenson sent me down to ask you."

"Him?" I said to the mirror. "On the ferry on the way over he took an intense dislike to my looks. Just about threw me in irons. What does he want now?"

"Oh, Axel," Roger said. "He was probably just in a bad mood because he was dying for a drink. Gets that way late in the afternoon. No, this is Nels Ostenson. He's the mayor here. Businessman. Rents our cottages and deals in real estate. He's a very nice guy, you'll see. I think he probably wants to make friends with the press. And you couldn't get better pancakes than they make at the Ostensons."

"Seduced!" I said. "Be out in a minute."

Roger showed me the way. The sun was so brilliant that it almost hurt; and under the bright sky, Nicolet Island looked as I'd hoped it would—the little street, snow-covered fields, sedate stone fences, and plain white farmhouses off in the distance. The snow squeaked under our boots.

"Did you ever meet Paul Hornung? What's Willie Davis like in person? Boy, and that Bart Starr! Did you interview him after that game with the Cowboys? How many counts does it take in the pocket when he sees his primary receiver is covered?" Roger kept asking me questions faster than I could answer them. We'd covered a fair amount of the Packer offensive game by the time we got to a frame office building with a sign reading, N. OSTENSON, BUILDERS, REAL ESTATE, PLUMBING & HEATING. Down the side of this, there was a cleared cement walk, between hedges, that led to a pleasant white clapboard house.

Nels Ostenson was a big gray-haired man with a Kris Kringle face and a ringing laugh. I liked him immediately. "By damn," he said, one hand on my shoulder, "my favorite author in person. I even read your tragedies—such as 'Colts Nose Out Packers Twenty-Four to Twenty.' But we won't talk about that. I'm sure everybody you meet talks Packers until you're sick of it."

He showed me into a pleasant room, where the sun shone through the front windows and bookcases lined the walls. A table with a white tablecloth was set up and almost as soon as we sat down, a teenage girl brought in some orange juice. ("Daughter Karen, Mr. Pope.")

And the pancakes were good—big and light and golden. After a

decent pause to make a serious start on them he said, "I'm going to apologize all over the place, Charley. I think you had a bad introduction to our little town out here, and I'm sorry. Wish I'd known you were coming. First of all, Axel was nasty to you on the ferryboat, I understand. Well, you've got to know Axel to know why. He's a good boy, but he's kind of on edge these days—family trouble. Wife had an operation last summer and she's never really recovered. One kid just about in college and lots of money worries. So I think you ought to forgive him for blowing his stack. He didn't know who you were. I guess he got into one of his moods."

Nels said all this with a sort of grandfatherly grin and some wide waves of his fork. He had a snowy white napkin tucked in his shirt collar, under his chin.

"I'd already forgotten. I shouldn't have gone poking around the pilothouse, anyway."

"Good! Good! Now that's settled," he said. "Too bad you had to run into two of our worst pieces of hard luck just when you arrived. I'm sorry about Ed Maier. I should say straight off that poor Ed is in terrible shape. You know, one of the things about a little community like ours is that we probably make a big mistake by being too charitable. Now, some other place Ed would have been put in a home long ago. But folks around here just can't stand the idea of shutting a man up if he's harmless—even if it would be for his own good. Ed's been more or less off his rocker since his wife died.

"Trouble is, everybody who knew Ed in the old days loves him. Why, he was practically the local hero for nearly ten years. Nobody kinder than Ed; nobody better at handling the kids. And in a basketball-crazy place like this, somebody who puts out winning teams year after year just about owns the town. Sure, nowadays he holes up in that shack of his, has the d.t.s, is full of crazy persecution delusions—but still it seems like nobody has the heart to commit him. It's probably my responsibility, but I'm just as weak-kneed as all the rest."

"I gathered something like that," I said. "He gave me a disconnected story about his daughter running away."

"And about the team?" Nels asked. He paused for a minute, looking directly at me.

"Something about the old championship team he coached, yes."

Nels sighed. "It's his worst bugaboo. He had a real crack-up back about Forty-seven, just after we won the championship. Pardon me if you've heard all this—but you have to understand something



about that freak accident to understand what happened to him. You'll hear some crazy superstitious stories, but the truth is that we had one of those terrible, foolish accidents that winter and a lot of stupid rumors got started.

"What really happened is this. The team was coming back one night from the championship game at Fish Creek. Bad weather, and Ed knew it was going to be worse. They got to Blackrock and the ferry was late coming over for them. We had a kid on the team at that time, Red Hockstader—great player but a big headstrong German kid. At Blackrock he talked the rest of the team into driving over the ice in his old car. You know, cross the strait and surprise everybody by sailing into the welcome party on their own wheels.

"Now, Ed did his damndest to talk them out of it—and he thought he had. But he didn't figure on Red's being so stubborn. So when Ed went up the road for a few minutes, the kids set out. Ordinarily it might be quite possible to drive right across the strait, if you did it in daylight and watched out sharp for rotten spots in the ice. It's different at night.

"Well, the sad story is that they must have hit a rotten spot and the whole team went right down to the bottom of the strait. Not a trace." He stared out of the window for a minute. "Anything else people say is pure baloney."

I hesitated. Finally I said, "I believe you. But there is one thing that bothers me."

He put down his fork and untucked his napkin. "What's that?"

"Well, since I've been here I've heard some of these rumors and one of them is pretty weird. People say that once in a while somebody sees an old Ford out on the ice, trying to make it across to Nicolet Island. Wrapped in mist, chugging along. All that. The old team trying to get home."

Nels threw his napkin on the floor and stood up. "Those damn kids!" he said. "Those damn jokers! I'll have the law on them one of these days, even if I have to get Madison to send the state police up!" His face was red and he kicked at a doorstep as he walked up and down.

"Charley, I don't know what's got into this generation. You know about sick jokes and black humor and all. I suppose most of that's harmless, but it does turn my stomach. Anyway, it's awful ghoulish when a practical joke is played on people who've really had members of their family killed or drowned, don't you think? So there's this bunch of smart-aleck kids in Blackrock who thought it was funny



to buy an old car somewhere, paint it up with signs like the ones on Hockstader's old jalopy, and give the ferry passengers a scare on dark nights by chugging out onto the ice and letting themselves be seen."

"Do you know who they are?" I asked. "Can't you catch them?"

"I will someday," he said. "Just wait. I had the whole of Blackrock searched last time but they must have had the thing hidden pretty carefully. Not a soul in the vicinity lets on that he knows a thing. But we'll catch them!"

"Cruelest thing is that old Ed really believes that car is out there. He swears that he hears it chugging along the shore by his house. Used to be he thought that only when he was drunk. Now he believes it all the time."

Before I left, Nels had calmed down a little and we talked about other subjects. Inevitably we got onto the Packers and I had to give him my personal impressions of Vince Lombardi.

Silence. Free Throw. The Nicolet Island guard leaned forward. Up on the toes, leaning more, then the calculated throw, a graceful arc, and the ball dropped through the basket, leaving in its wake a dancing net, a howling gym. Before the referee could place the ball back in action, the timekeeper sounded the buzzer. End of the third quarter. Score: Nicolet Island 51, Ephraim 51.

Ed Kinney thought the island's population to be approximately 200, and my educated crowd-estimate placed the local rooters at nearly that number. Most had arrived early, well before game time, and had invaded the gray-wooden bleachers, leaving cramped space for the half hundred Ephraim fans who had crossed over on the midafternoon ferry.

Captain Axel Ostenson was there. So was Nels. I scanned the faces. Roger, carrying a bucket, gave me a big wave. Only Ed Maier was missing.

I'd spent the day poking around the island, picking up bits of local lore and tramping over some snow-covered but attractive landscape. My idea for a feature story with just a touch of supernatural as a come-on had to be junked (Old Legend of a Lost Team Still Haunts Nicolet Island). Everybody had heard the tale, of course, and everybody had then said, Poor Ed Maier, alcoholism was a terrible thing, and one of these days poor old Ed would probably have to be put away in an institution.

Only one thing stuck in the back of my mind and bothered me.

When I'd seen Ed, he'd been garrulous and probably drunk. He'd rambled on about lots of things he seemed to want to get off his mind. But he'd never mentioned the "ghost-car" story.

The timekeeper's buzzer announced the fourth quarter. Both sides scored repeatedly, though the game remained close. Then, with two minutes remaining, the Ephraim center, six-foot-five and full of aggression, committed his fifth personal foul and was returned to the bench, giving Nicolet Island five both home-court advantage and control of the boards. The game ended in thunderous glory. Nicolet Island 71, Ephraim Bay 68. Door County champions again.

At that exact amount the whole population of the island went slambang out of their Scandinavian heads with one great, hoarse, endless yell of victory. Now I know what the berserk Vikings must have sounded like. The siren on top of the volunteer firehouse began to blast the air. I made it down to the locker room holding my ears.

They were still yelling up there as I tried to interview a totally incoherent coach Ostberg and a bunch of soaking-wet lunatic kids. Never mind. I've been in this business a long time and I've got a whole notebook full of the clichés. "It was a team effort. I never could have done it without the whole team in there fighting all the way. A great bunch of boys," etc. I keep wishing somebody would say something different one day.

The American Legion Hall had just about all the red, white, and blue you could possibly put in without going blind. From the rafters was hung a huge sign—obviously put into place that afternoon—NICOLET ISLAND BASKETBALL TEAM, DOOR COUNTY CHAMPS. The island's German band, in splendid befrogged blue uniforms, boomed out victory marches. The ladies of the American Legion Auxiliary doled out mugs of not the watery punch you might expect but a hot, spicy, and potent *glogg*. The smorgasbord was delicious. Every kid in town was dancing.

Scenes of great hilarity and joy in which I don't share and large amounts of *glogg*, which I cherish but which affects me like a lullaby, sooner or later drove me homeward. I came out into the bitter cold of the parking lot to the strains—for the tenth time—of *Hail to the Victors Valiant*, and hoped my car would start without any fuss.

It took a little effort, but at last the engine turned over. Suddenly I heard a noise, a sort of choking cough, from the back seat. I turned around. Huddled there, apparently passed out, was old Ed Maier. He'd come to hear the sound of victory, it seemed, but he just couldn't

force himself to go inside. Lucky I'd come out early or he'd probably have frozen to death.

So I drove him to his house. I hauled him out and dragged him into the house—he was stiff in more ways than one, but he was still breathing and seemed in no danger. I put him to bed on the studio couch in his front room and coaxed the fire into a blaze. Under the old army blanket he breathed hoarsely. I guessed he was safe enough, but he'd have quite a headache when he woke up.

I switched off the lamp and went to the door. Just as I got it halfway open, I heard Ed Maier's voice loud and clear in the darkness—

*"Now hear the truth, by God."*

"Ed?" I said. "Are you all right? It's Charley Pope." I eased the door shut.

He seemed not to have heard me. He started to speak again in that clear, deliberate, unslurred voice, not like a drunk but like a man dictating a statement.

"Witness before God. Last night, before we went to Fish Creek, I made Sally tell me the story. Knocked up, at first I thought, well, hell, it does happen and this isn't the first shotgun match on the island. And then something funny about her and the way she was acting and crying and refusing to name the boy; and I guess I did slap her around a little, first time in her life since she was a small kid and had a spanking. But Julia's hysterical down there and I guess I'm strung tight because of the big game, and so I did hit her. And so she did tell, did tell, did tell. Horrible dirty thing; how could they do it? In Holmgren's barn, Sally and the whole team, the whole damn team, my boys, and I thought of them as my boys, every one of them there with Sally, and she didn't care.

"And awful hard for me not to let on I knew. At Blackrock, by the smokehouse, Red didn't especially want to try the trip; they'd been joking about it and some said what a big sensation it'd be; but Red, no, he wasn't foolish. Was only after I gave him a big drink from my hip flask and called the whole bunch cowards. Cowards, cowards. 'You guys can beat Fish Creek, but you're scared to get out on the ice; I drove it myself a dozen times, once in a snowstorm. Cowards.'

"No, they weren't. When I got back, they'd gone—"

I waited for a long time. "Ed?" I asked. "You awake?" He was beginning to snore. He was out cold, as drunk as I'd ever seen a man, but the strange thing was that I believed every word of his story . . .

I woke the next morning to a semi-blizzard. It wasn't a really serious, driving Wisconsin storm—it was more like a boy blizzard having a snowball fight. It howled as if laughing and threw snow on the town. Momentarily it would clear and there would be a faint haze of sunshine overhead; then it would rush in as if to smother us with a heavy blast of new snow. At those times it made a kind of snow twilight. It was like that when I drove up to the landing—so dark that the lights of the *R. L. Ostenson* were shining.

Axel met me as I came on board. He had been waiting especially for my arrival, and he shook my hand. "Please feel welcome to ride either in the pilothouse or in the lounge, Mr. Pope," he said. "But *please* don't stay out on the deck in this gusty weather. The deck is slippery and you could have a bad fall."

"I won't bother you, Axel," I said. "I appreciate your invitation, but I think I'll just hole up in the cabin and read my book this trip."

We smiled and he slapped me on the shoulder, then turned to go along the deck.

The hunchback drove my car aboard—that made only the third one. There seemed to be no more than half a dozen passengers this time. I settled down in an empty booth in the lounge and tried to translate my mind to the shores of Lake Victoria and the upper reaches of the White Nile.

Successfully, too. When I next looked up I realized that the engines were throbbing and that we had been under way for some minutes. I put down the book and I walked over to look out the window.

The snow and wind were still playing their fitful games—nothing but whiteness all around us for one minute, then a sudden clear period when you could see the dark channel and maybe even one hundred yards or so out across the expanse of ice. I stood there, lost in a kind of meditation, for some time.

Chugga-chugga-chugga. I couldn't believe it. I opened the door and went out onto the deck. Not near, not far, stubbornly paralleling our course somewhere out there on the ice.

I was suddenly furious. Nels was absolutely right. It was the most senseless, ghoulish, idiotic practical joke in the world. Those high-school kids from Blackrock ought to be caught, have their car confiscated, be thrown in jail—even get a good whipping. Not only were they harassing the Nicolet Islanders in this stupid way but they were risking their own lives every time—look what had happened once before.

I went down to the car deck, full of this kind of resentment, hoping

to get a glimpse of the old jalopy. Apparently nobody else had heard the sound, because I was all alone in the wind. I leaned over the rail and peered forward into the white confusion. The chugga-chugga seemed just a few yards away.

Then, suddenly, the breeze dropped, there was a clearing in the storm, and I saw it. I saw every detail. The old car was painted black, but the body had a lot of rust on it. One running board sagged. The left-rear fender had been crumpled. A light trail of snow streamed off the layer of white on top of the roof. The battered old license-plate was, sure enough, WISCONSIN 1947. But it wasn't any of this that made me jump off the ferryboat.

I still don't know quite how I did it. I remember taking hold of a rope and swinging over the side. It was probably lucky for me that no more than a yard or so of black channel showed between the boat's side and the ice shelf, and I swung across easily.

A puff of snowy wind came up again and the car was only a dim form ahead of me. I ran. I seemed to hear some kind of shout from behind me, from the boat, but nothing was going to stop me now.

Ten yards, fifteen yards; I thought I'd never catch up. It was hard running, because the ice gave good footing one second and none at all the next.

When the snow suddenly cleared I saw that the old Ford had stopped. They were waiting for me, heads in stocking caps poked out of the windows, faces of the boys grinning with mischief. The driver's red hair poked out from beneath his cap. They loved my startled reaction.

Ed Maier's body lay at the end of a ten-foot rope that had been tied to the rear axle. The rope was under his armpits, not around his neck, but I knew that he was dead, anyway. His face was partly covered with ice dust, partly bloody scrapes, but I knew him. I don't think there was the least bit of astonishment in his expression.

I didn't hear the ferryboat's engine stop. The first thing I knew was that the hunchback was scrambling across the ice, yelling at me. It was he who saw me jump overboard.

When he came up to me, he found me standing all alone, staring into the snowfall that was now coming down thick and steady over the wide desolate ice expanse of the Porte des Morts.

The Missing Miss Maydew

Mr. Craig Hunter was very young, and very handsome, and his feet hurt. As he climbed the front steps of the brownstone house in New York's East Twenties he was, to put it in the vernacular, dragging. But after ringing the doorbell he pulled himself together so that he looked rather jaunty; he assumed an air of youthful gallantry.

The door was opened by an attractive woman of about sixty. She wore a simple cotton housedress covered by a full-length apron. Her speech was cultivated and pleasant, her smile friendly.

"Good afternoon, young man," she said.

"Mrs. Dresden? Mrs. Cora Dresden?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My name is Craig Hunter," he said. He smiled his very young, very charming smile. "You are just about my last hope, Mrs. Dresden."

"Oh, dear," she said. "If you're selling something, Mr. Hunter—"

"I am," he said. "Myself!"

"I—I don't think I understand," Mrs. Dresden said.

"I am an actor, Mrs. Dresden."

She smiled. "Oh, I could see that right away, Mr. Hunter. But that doesn't mean you aren't selling something. I mean—between engagements—"

"You've hit the nail right on the head, Mrs. Dresden," he said.

"I am between engagements. I had my first break—a good small part in a Broadway show. But after the out-of-town tryout in Philadelphia—"

"Closed?"

"Closed," he said. "I have very little money, Mrs. Dresden. And if I'm to hang on until something else turns up I must live most economically. I've looked everywhere in New York, but room rents are so high. Then, this afternoon a friend of mine, Tommy Enders, told me about your house, and that you have rooms—and that you're an old pro yourself and understand my kind of situation." He hurried on because he saw a small frown crease her forehead. "I really do

know Tommy Enders. And I really do need your gracious hospitality. And—”

“Oh, dear, Mr. Hunter,” Mrs. Dresden said. “I’m terribly afraid I’m completely full up.”

Behind his smile, behind the attempt at bravado in his very young blue eyes, there suddenly appeared panic. “I—I could sleep anywhere, Mrs. Dresden. In the attic. In the coal bin—” He laughed hopefully.

“Oh, dear. Well, at least come in, Mr. Hunter.”

He followed her into the cool front hall. The aroma of what seemed to be a savory beef stew came from the rear of the house. Craig Hunter put his small canvas bag on a chair. Mrs. Dresden was looking up the stairway, frowning.

“There just isn’t a place, Mr. Hunter,” she said. “Except—”

“Except?” he asked eagerly.

“We’re involved in a rather unusual and somewhat frightening situation here,” Mrs. Dresden said. “A young girl—Millicent Maydew—have you ever heard of her, Mr. Hunter?”

Honesty seemed like the best bet. “I’m afraid not,” he said.

“A lovely girl,” Mrs. Dresden said, her frown deepening. “She’s been with us for some time. A few days ago—well, she disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“She just didn’t come home,” Mrs. Dresden said. “She hadn’t taken any of her things. She just—just vanished.”

“An actress?”

“A very good one,” Mrs. Dresden said.

“Perhaps she got an out-of-town job,” Craig Hunter suggested, “and didn’t have time to tell you. Perhaps you’ll get a letter—”

“She wouldn’t go out of town without taking any of her clothes,” Mrs. Dresden said. “And if she was in town, she’d have phoned me. I’m most frightfully worried.”

“I’m sorry,” Hunter said. “Have you done anything about it?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been to the police. They’re searching, but they have nothing to report as yet.” Mrs. Dresden squared her shoulders. “The point is, Mr. Hunter, I could let you use Millicent’s room for a night or two—unless, of course, she comes back. I wouldn’t want you to disturb any of her things—”

“I’d be eternally grateful,” he said, and he meant it.

Mrs. Dresden led the way up to the second floor and opened the door of a room at the head of the stairs. The faint scent of a perfume—lavender, he thought it was—reached him. The room was

neat. There was just a bed and a dresser and one comfortable chair by the window. And a closet. On the bureau was a framed photograph.

"I could clean out the bottom bureau drawer for you," Mrs. Dresden said. "I wouldn't want you to use the closet. All her clothes are there." Her voice was unsteady.

Hunter went to the bureau and looked at the photograph. It was that of a beautiful young girl, costumed to play Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

"Shakespeare!" he said.

"A summer production last season," Mrs. Dresden said. Then her voice broke and two big tears ran down her cheeks. "I'm so terribly worried about her. But the police are doing what they can, I know. I think—I think she'd want me to let you have the room, Mr. Hunter, until you can find something else. She knows what the beginning struggles in the theater are."

"I'm deeply grateful," he said. "And if I can help in any way—"

"Perhaps some of the young people you know might—might have heard something." Mrs. Dresden bent down and took some things out of the bottom bureau drawer. "But there—I mustn't burden you. The lavatory is just down the hall, Mr. Hunter."

Hunter took his few belongings out of the canvas bag. His two clean shirts, underwear, socks, and a clean handkerchief went in the bottom drawer. He was about to put his shaving kit and brush and comb on the bureau, but somehow it seemed like disturbing things too much. He put them on the window-sill. He looked at the Rosalind photograph again. So young, so eager. Millicent Maydew was obviously a stage name. All her eggs in one basket. Like him.

Things could happen to a young and pretty girl in a city like New York. Bad things. Who would help her? Like himself, she probably had no one to help. Only old Mrs. Dresden, worried but not able to do anything beyond reporting the disappearance to the police. He felt a sudden kinship for this missing girl—alone somewhere, frightened, perhaps ill. There ought to be some way he could help.

Toward evening Craig Hunter walked over to Second Avenue and had something to eat in a steamy, none-too-clean Coffee Pot. He had to be very careful of the little money he had left. It was dark as he started back toward Mrs. Dresden's boarding house. He noticed a building on his left with two green lights burning outside the door.



The police precinct house. On impulse he went in. Perhaps they might have some news.

The desk sergeant was a grouchy-looking individual, suffering from the heat.

"Yeah?" he said belligerently.

"My name is Craig Hunter. I'm staying at Mrs. Dresden's rooming house just around the corner. I wondered if there was any report on Millicent Maydew?"

The sergeant glared at him. "You a relative?"

"No, but I—"

"You a friend of the family or somethin'?"

"No. But I thought if there was any news I could tell Mrs. Dresden about it when I get back."

"Go peddle your papers," the sergeant said.

"Now look here," Hunter said, his anger rising. "This girl is alone in the city. I suppose she's just a case number to you. But there are people who are concerned about her. We have a right to know what you've learned, if anything—"

"Get out of here and don't bother me," the sergeant said. "Or would you like to spend the night in a cell? We ain't givin' out anything to strangers. You ain't a member of the family and you ain't—"

"What's the trouble, McGrath?" a pleasant voice said behind Hunter. He turned and saw a man in captain's uniform. The man had a tired but amiable face. Craig told him why he had stopped in.

"You don't know the Maydew girl personally?" the captain asked.

"No, but surely—"

"Now take it easy, Mr. Hunter. We're doing all we can. You tell Mrs. Dresden that no news is good news. There's no evidence of foul play."

"Foul play!"

The captain gave him an odd look. "That is the phrase, isn't it?"

When Hunter got back to the boarding house he glanced into the sitting room, hoping Mrs. Dresden might be there and he could pass on the captain's news. It wasn't much, but as he'd said, "No news is good news." Mrs. Dresden wasn't anywhere about, so Hunter climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Outside the door of his room—Miss Maydew's room—he stopped. A strip of light showed under the door. Hunter knew he had left his lights turned off. Perhaps Mrs. Dresden was making the bed. Or

perhaps Miss Maydew had come back. Hesitantly he opened the door.

Standing by the bureau was an elderly man. He had the remnants of a very handsome face. As he turned from the bureau Hunter saw that he had the brightest blue eyes he had ever seen.

"Yes?" Hunter said.

"Mr. Craig Hunter?" The voice was deep, cultivated, slightly English. An actor's voice.

"Yes. What are you doing in here?"

"Waiting for you," the man said. "My name is Darwin Campbell. I am one of Mrs. Dresden's tenants."

"You were going through the bureau drawers!" Hunter said.

"Was I? Just passing away the time," Campbell said.

It came over Hunter in a surge of clarity. An old man! A lecherous old man! He'd probably annoyed Miss Maydew—kept after her and kept after her. Perhaps she'd threatened him and he'd had to silence her. Now he'd come back, looking for something—something that would connect him with her disappearance. Perhaps a letter. Perhaps some present he'd given her.

"What were you looking for?" Hunter asked coldly. "What have you done with her?"

The bright blue eyes fixed on Hunter, unblinking. Then, very slowly, Campbell's right hand moved toward the pocket of his tweed jacket. There was a bulge there. Hunter sprang at him, grabbing the frail old arm in both his strong hands.

"We'll have none of that!" Hunter said. He pulled Campbell's hand free of the pocket and fished in it for the bulge. He came out with it—a black, stem-chewed briar pipe.

"I think perhaps you'd better close the door, Mr. Hunter," Campbell said gently, but firmly.

Hunter backed to the door, closing it behind him. Darwin Campbell turned to the bureau and opened the second drawer. Hunter watched him, still wary. The old man took some sort of undergarment from the drawer and held it out.

"Ever seen one of these before, Mr. Hunter?" Campbell asked. "Or are you perhaps too young to be an aficionado in the matter of ladies' underthings? In its day this garment was called a step-in. A very serviceable one-piece affair." He dropped it back in the drawer. This time he brought out a long narrow box. "Look in this, Mr. Hunter."

Hesitantly, Hunter took the box, opened it, and saw six pairs of stockings, each pair in a little compartment.

"Have you bought any stockings for a young lady recently?" Campbell asked. "Probably not. But you have heard the word 'nylon,' I imagine. Those stockings, Mr. Hunter, are pure silk. I defy you to go out and buy a pair in this modern age." He took back the box and put it neatly in the drawer.

For some reason he couldn't explain, Hunter felt the small hairs crawling on the back of his neck.

Campbell turned to the bureau and took the photograph in his delicate, blue-veined hands. "You've looked at this photograph, Mr. Hunter? Here, look at it again."

Hunter took it, frowning. The wistful, hopeful Rosalind gazed at him appealingly.

"Turn it over, Mr. Hunter," Darwin Campbell said, "and look at the back."

There was nothing on the back of it except the photographer's name and the date: *Lupescue 1919*.

Campbell's voice went on, gently.

"I was, as I told you, waiting for you, Mr. Hunter," he said. "Captain Tabor called me from the precinct station and told me of your visit. Captain Tabor is a very decent, sympathetic man, Mr. Hunter." The old man drew a deep breath. "There is nothing or no one missing in this house, Mr. Hunter—except Mrs. Dresden's lost youth. Look at the photograph again, my boy, carefully."

Hunter moistened his lips. "It's a theatrical glossy. Mrs. Dresden?"

"Yes, Mrs. Dresden—twenty-nine years ago," Campbell said. "Millicent Maydew was her stage name. One day she woke up and found that 'Millicent Maydew' was gone. Some of us can bear that discovery, Mr. Hunter. Some of us can't. 'Millicent Maydew' has been preserved in this room for nearly thirty years."

Darwin Campbell took a handkerchief from his pocket and blotted his lips with it. "I had to explain it to you so you wouldn't search too hard. But we all preserve the fiction, Mr. Hunter. Mrs. Dresden couldn't survive without the hope that someday 'Millicent Maydew' will return. I trust you will help preserve her hope."

Hunter found it difficult to reply. His throat muscles ached. "You can count on me," he said in a husky voice.

"Q"

Barbara Callahan

## November Story

For a long time I've been searching for a ladder out of limbo. I always knew a ladder would be necessary because as a child I visualized limbo as a deep shaft bounded on four sides by concrete. There was no lid on limbo, no covering to block out the view of the sky or of the people who skipped over the opening on their way to joys and sorrows.

In limbo there are no joys or sorrows. There is only a numbness, as if each soul lowered into the shaft, existing somewhere between heaven and hell, had been novocained before being dispatched there. I am always asked how I manage to sit so still and stare so intently when I am onstage where my husband, Senator Flip Morley, is delivering a speech I've heard at least a hundred times. It's easy, I tell a reporter or the frightened wife of a young man newly lighting the political horizon; my husband is the most brilliant man I've ever met. His words never fail to mesmerize me.

His words mesmerize me into limbo. I sit on the stage and I can't move because four concrete gray walls have been dropped around my chair. There's a portable limbo that follows me wherever I go. I stare intently because I am hoping that a ladder will appear on one of the walls and that I will become sufficiently unanesthetized to grab at it, and pull myself up and out of my concrete pit.

Once I almost caught the ladder. Before sitting down on a chair, I bumped my ankle against a hard metal rung. The pain, unwelcome to most, animated me. For a moment I was a live, feeling human being. I even experienced tears stinging my eyes. I was so alive that I heard an official who was of the same party as my husband introduce Flip Morley as the "man who will save us all, the man who will be the next President of the United States."

His words were the signal for all the faithful gathered in the audience to leap to their feet and shriek, "Flip! Flip! Flip!" As I sat there, blinking away the tears of pain, I saw a ladder. It wasn't distinct. It was wavy and insubstantial, but it would have to do. I lunged for it. It felt cold in my hand. One side of it had slipped away. I blinked again and saw that I was gripping a microphone. I had

come too far to let go, and I heard myself saying, "If he is the man to save us, God save us all."

A hand thrust itself over mine. Once again I felt pain. The hand belonged to the former champion discus thrower and current champion senator from Pennsylvania, Flip Morley. "I'm sure you didn't hear what my wife said because of all the noise. Please permit an unsolicited testimonial from an unbiased voter who couldn't contain her enthusiasm. Please be quiet." The crowd laughed delightedly and then settled down. Crowds have always responded obediently, in fact almost reverently, to Flip.

The hand that threw the discus was about to rule the world and that hand never left mine as I spoke clearly into the microphone. "If you look to any other man to save us, then God save us all." The crowd roared, a high-school band crashed into *The Pennsylvania Polka*, and Flip kissed me on the cheek, a kiss that was forever frozen into a wire-service photo that flashed around the world.

The next day's headlines on the Women's Pages read, "Liz Morley Checks into Arizona Beauty Spa." A lie. A person looking very much like me checked into an Arizona Beauty Spa, courtesy of party funds. "Mrs. Morley wants to lose eight pounds before purchasing a chic campaign wardrobe," bubbled the articles.

"Take your medicine like a good girl," bubbled the nurse in the sanatorium in Upper New York State where I was driven immediately after I had grabbed at the elusive ladder.

After three days I was allowed busywork, not basket weaving or moccasin sewing like the other Limbo Ladies who swished by my room in shrouds of high-priced bathrobes. My therapy had to be solitary lest a drug-fogged brain in a moment of lucidity recognize the wife of the strongest contender for the presidency. My husband's secretary, my only visitor, brought me a manila envelope. Briskly she opened it and told me to get to work. She loathes me and loves my husband. I am the fly in her ointment. I am the fly that must be swatted every so often in its erratic flight to the White House. She has her eye on a desk in a room next to the Oval Office, just as I have my eye on a ladder which must exist somewhere.

"Liz Morley's Handbook for Political Wives" read the first page in the envelope. "A Lady in every sense of the word" read page two, "a Lady whose grace, charm, and loyalty have assisted her husband in his twenty-two-year ascent to the leadership of our party." The lovely blurb came from Bert Dooley, a raucous political figure whose acquaintance with ladies was limited to those of the night.

The handbook came as an order from Dooley headquarters. "Get your wife to write a book for some of those broads who're coming on the scene with their husbands. Loud-mouthed radical bunch who'll say whatever pops into their heads. And their clothes! One of those dolls came to a rally dressed in jeans—jeans, for Pete's sake!"

I skimmed through the pages, stopping to smile at the chapter on "How to Sit, Smile, and Speak Correctly Onstage." "Don't go looking for ladders, they're really microphones," I penciled in at the top of the page. Then I dropped the 62 pages into a wastebasket. My husband's secretary has a carbon copy. In fact, she is a carbon copy. Of me. She read my book before I wrote it. Since she was surpassing me in lady-ness, she could finish it.

When I arrived home, the chic campaign wardrobe was waiting for me, along with a reporter from *Lib Magazine*. She had been given permission by my husband and his staff of advisors to stay with me for a day and a half to gather material for an article. The Morley think-tank was delighted that a feminist magazine thought me worthy of attention. Before meeting the reporter I was briefed by my husband's secretary.

"This is a unique opportunity for Flip Morley to enter into the consciousness of those women's libbers. They're too chauvinistic to interview him, so you'll have to get across to their readers. Don't let him down. He's very concerned about you."

"So concerned," I answered, "that he sent me a vase of flowers with a beautiful card signed by you."

"He's busy, you know," she snapped.

"Of course," I said. "With you."

Flashing me a murderous glance, she admitted the reporter. Her name was Molly Schwenker. She was about 28 years old. She had red hair, freckles, an excess of twenty pounds, and spots on her pants suit. She carried a tape recorder in a shoulder bag. Endowed with a strong sense of integrity, she announced, whenever she pressed a button on the machine, "This is for the record, Mrs. Morley."

Our first venture together was to an outing for handicapped children. The Morley team arranged many such appearances for me. Since Flip and I were childless, I had to be seen as often as possible with children. The image to be projected was that of Mrs. Earth, mother of all, rather than mother of none. Our only child had been stillborn.

"This is for the record, Mrs. Morley. Do you really like these visits

with kids?" Molly asked after I had been photographed sitting on a motionless carousel horse with a three-year-old boy on my lap.

"I love them," I answered fiercely. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you look so sad when you see them, except when you're being photographed. Then you beam like a movie star. Afterward you hand them right back to their mothers."

We were walking along the fairgrounds, hurrying to keep on schedule so that we could be seen with all the age groups and with all the personnel who cared for them. The bright candy day suddenly became colorless. I saw a gray Ferris wheel, a gray hot-dog stand, and a gray funhouse. The walls of the funhouse advanced toward me until they enclosed me in their grayness. I didn't have to reach out to know that the walls were made of concrete. I was standing in limbo, in familiar limbo.

A whirring noise invaded my limbo. It came from Molly's tape recorder.

"That question is off the record, Mrs. Morley. I erased it."

She pulled at my arm and led me to a bench.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I did do my homework. I just forgot that you lost your only child. Forgive me."

A face as pretty and vivacious as Molly's should not look pained. I smiled at her and squeezed her hand. The grayness faded from her face and from the fairgrounds.

"Just ask me about my husband and we'll do fine," I told her.

"It's a deal," she promised, and turned on the tape recorder.

For the record I told her about Flip, the star athlete, president of his class, and Phi Beta Kappa, courting me. I told her about our marriage in an army chapel in Georgia. I told her about our neophyte political days when we drove through the gorgeous Pennsylvania countryside in an old jeep, a laughing loving couple on more of a lark than on an earnest foray into the battlefield of politics. When Flip unseated the incumbent in the state legislature, the lark ended.

As I related the story of our early days in Washington, I noticed that Molly hadn't once turned off the tape recorder. Apparently my recitation, polished to perfection from years of performance, enchanted her. She was a thrilled listener to a monologue that I had delivered many times. She believed that the actress loved her lines. An actress, poor Molly, can do a beautiful job even in a role she hates.

When I finished, Molly sighed. "I know we at *Lib Magazine* aren't supposed to be turned on by romantic stories, but I am. You must

love your husband so much, Mrs. Morley, that you would die for him."

"I did die for him," I responded. "I went to limbo."

The whirring noise returned. "I'll erase that, Mrs. Morley," Molly said. "That's off the record."

"Thank you," I said.

As we drove back to my home in Virginia, I almost reached into Molly's bag to take the recorder. I wanted to pick up the little microphone and tell it many things. Off-the-record things. Like the night I waited and waited for Flip to come home from a rally so he could drive me to the hospital to have the baby. I needed him badly at that time. When he didn't come, I called a cab. The baby who had needed expert care was delivered in the emergency room by an intern who was plainly scared.

The first gray stone of limbo descended. Whenever I tried to get out of bed to look through the window at the azaleas in our yard, the beautiful flowers were blocked by the image of a gray concrete stone that bore the name of our child. The stone grew larger and larger until it became a wall.

After the baby's death, while I lay wrapped tightly in a quilt of depression, a quilt too heavy to push away, Flip sat with me and read to me. Then as the weeks slipped into a month, his bedside visits became less frequent. A young senator on the rise had to be seen in the right places with the right people.

"Where to tonight, Mrs. Morley?" Molly asked.

"A cocktail party at the State Department," I answered.

Molly didn't bring the tape recorder to the cocktail party. "Too many background noises," she told me. I enjoyed watching her balance a martini glass while nibbling on a miniature quiche Lorraine. I laughed aloud when she shook hands with a distinguished-looking gentleman who walked away from her wiping bits of pie crust from his fingers. Some of the cotton-candy day drifted into the evening until I saw Greta Ferguson.

Greta walked by me without speaking. She hasn't spoken to me since Flip assumed the chairmanship of the committee her husband used to head.

Although her husband had ostensibly resigned because of ill health, Greta and I knew the real reason. Flip had assembled enough damaging information on Senator Ferguson to send him to prison. In exchange for the chairmanship, Flip promised to destroy all the data. He didn't. On the day Flip, as an unnamed source, released



the evidence to the press, Senator Ferguson jumped to his death from the twentieth floor of his gray apartment building.

When I went to pay a condolence visit to Mrs. Ferguson, she told me everything. The gray wall of the Ferguson's apartment building became the second wall of my limbo.

After the cocktail party Flip flew to Indianapolis. I insisted that Molly spend the night at our house. We sat at the kitchen table and sipped hot chocolate. Molly did a humorous, nonstop commentary on the people she had met at the party. I squealed with laughter at her recital. The tape recorder stayed inside her shoulder bag. Nothing was on the record. That night I slept without help from pills. Laughter had loosened all my tight muscles.

In the morning Molly accompanied me to a breakfast for senators' wives. Her dexterity with a Danish equaled her finesse with a miniature quiche Lorraine. Her comments about the breakfast centered on Lisa Van Ecklin, the wife of the senator from New York. "Did you see those jewels she was wearing—and to breakfast yet?" she squeaked. "She must have worn a quarter of a million dollars' worth of jewels."

"They're imitations," I told her.

"Are you a connoisseur of jewels?" she asked.

"Only of her jewels."

The real Van Ecklin jewels lay coldly glittering in a safe-deposit box. Our safe-deposit box. I saw them when I went to the bank to secure documents I needed for a trip. When I asked Flip about them, he shrugged and said, "Call them a little insurance for our old age. Van Ecklin's kid is in jail in Mexico for possession of narcotics. The story the esteemed senator from New York gives out is that the kid is on an archeological expedition. The only digging Junior will do, if he's lucky, is tunneling. I got the information from a reporter who owed me a favor. When I confronted Van Ecklin with the scoop, he literally shoved the jewels in my pocket."

The gray door of a bank vault became the third wall of my limbo.

After the breakfast Molly had to catch a plane. I volunteered my driver for the trip to the airport. On the way she said, "You've been very kind, Mrs. Morley, so kind that I have a confession to make. *Lib Magazine* wanted me to do a scathing article about you as a plastic person. They consider you the epitome of passive womanhood, of the woman who rode to fame on her husband's coattails. I can't write about you that way. I see you as a person who formed a partnership and worked actively to keep that partnership alive. You've

participated in the electoral process by sacrificing everything to help your husband, a fine man, get to the top. I'm not going to knock that. I'm going to write an article based on the talk we had at the fairgrounds. Nothing else is going into the article. I think you're a beautiful person, Mrs. Morley, but you're very sad. Your sadness is a mystery to me and it's strictly your business. It's no material for an article."

Deeply touched by her remarks, I felt the same kind of stinging in my eyes that I had experienced when my ankle bumped the metal chair—alive once more.

"Your editors aren't going to like that, Molly."

"There are other jobs," she answered.

"What would keep you in your job?" I asked.

"A scoop. Some kind of fantastic scoop. I'd have it made for the rest of my life."

"When you land tonight, wish on a star. Maybe you'll get your scoop."

As I watched her board the plane, I had a sense of loss. I focused on the plane until I could see nothing but the grayness of the November sky.

Driving home, the image of the colorless sky stayed with me. I tried to hold onto the image of Molly's rust-colored freckles and her green eyes, but my mind continued to gravitate toward the absence of color, to the sky.

I remembered standing at a window and looking out at a gray sky for signs of salvation when Flip told me we would not be receiving any more letters from a stewardess who wrote us threatening to expose Flip's affair with her. I could not take my eyes off that gray sky because I had just finished reading a newspaper account of the strangulation of a twenty-five-year-old airline stewardess, the apparent victim of a robbery-slaying.

"She's taking a job overseas," he said. "We'll never hear from her again."

When the hand of the discus thrower touched my shoulder as a prelude to a kiss, I stood rigid, never lifting my eyes from the gray slab of sky formed by my window.

The slab of gray sky became the fourth wall of my limbo. I was sealed inside.

There is not only an absence of color in limbo but also an absence of feeling. It's like being in a full-length cast with only one's head poking out. The head sticks out because there is no lid on limbo.

Anyone can look down into limbo. But until Molly came, no one ever did.

When I got home from the airport, I went into Flip's study and sat for a long time in his leather armchair. Dozing, I saw Molly leaning over a concrete shaft. She had something in her hand, something she was unwinding. She lowered it slowly down to me. I reached for it and found that it was tape from a tape recorder. As I grabbed hold of it, Molly pulled me up out of limbo.

When I awoke I realized I had been searching for the wrong thing. It wasn't a ladder that would lift me out of limbo; it was a tape recorder. Flip had a recorder on his desk. I took it out of the drawer. I pressed a button and said, "This is Liz Morley and everything I say on this tape is for the record, Molly. You must have wished on a star tonight because here is your scoop."

The first gray wall, the grave marker, did not go on the tape. I helped construct that wall myself. I should have known that Flip would not leave a rally because I had called. His eye was on the political prize, not on me. I should have known that.

But I did tell the little machine about Senator Ferguson. "Flip Morley was the unnamed source who released the damaging information that sent Senator Ferguson plummeting to his death."

And I told the machine about the jewels in our safe-deposit box, without saying who gave them to Flip. And I told the machine who had ordered the strangling of the airline stewardess a few years ago. As I spoke, my voice became a trumpet and the gray walls came tumbling down.

When I finished making the tape, I put it in a box and wrapped it in brown paper. I addressed it to Molly in care of *Lib Magazine*. It was four o'clock, an hour before the post office closed. I slipped into my coat and hurried downstairs. I wanted to walk to the post office so that I could look at people on the street without the hindrance of the gray cataracts that had clouded my vision for so long.

The first person I saw as I walked down the front steps was Flip. He had stepped out of a cab. I dropped the small package and it bounced crookedly toward his feet. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand.

"What's this?"

"A tape that Molly the reporter from *Lib Magazine* made. She left it here," I lied. "I'm going to mail it to her."

"I hope there's nothing in it that would offend the party," he said.

"Nothing at all," I said.

"Good girl," he said and leaned down to kiss me. As his head neared mine, I noticed the lines of fatigue etched in his face.

"Don't be long," Flip called as I started down the street. "I'm giving a speech tonight."

"I won't be long," I answered.

The people on the street looked so colorful to me. I noticed the ruddiness of their cheeks and the brightness of their eyes. Then for some reason I stopped looking at the women and looked only at the men. And all the men had Flip's face. One man had Flip's face contorted with pain—the pain of my betrayal. Another man had Flip's face twisted with hatred—hatred of me. Still another had Flip's face consumed with despair—the despair at ever being a free man again. Each of the men looked to me as Flip would look when he read Molly's scoop in print.

I had to get away from those faces. Those faces were doing something to me. They were creating a sensation in me that I hadn't experienced for years. Those faces were causing me pain. I was feeling a desperate kind of pain, Flip's future pain.

Holding tightly to the package in my pocket, I started to run. When I reached the post office, I stood outside, breathless, hoping that I could rid myself of the pain as easily as I could rid myself of the box. But I knew that if I mailed the box the pain would never leave me.

In limbo there are no pleasures, but there are also no pains. I put the box into my pocket and walked away from the post office. I walked for a long while until I reached the river. I stood on a bridge and dropped the little package into the river's gray swirling currents. At that moment I knew I had put a lid on my limbo, a fluid gray lid that would ebb and flow over me as long as I lived. No one would ever peer down into the shaft at me again.

That night Flip received a standing ovation for his speech. Then the M.C. worked the audience into a sustained frenzy of whistling and applause. After the tumult subsided, the M.C. wouldn't quit. He solicited more acclaim for his speaker. "Let's hear it for Flip Morley. Let's hear it for the senator from Pennsylvania. Let's hear it for the next President of the United States!" he shouted.

The noise of the crowd was so deafening I could barely hear a small voice that seemed to be speaking under water, a voice that seemed to be saying, "Let's hear it for limbo."

Cornell Woolrich

## The Death of Me

As soon as the front door closed behind her I locked it on the inside. I'd never yet known her to go out without forgetting something and coming back for it. This was one time I wasn't letting her in again.

I undid my tie and snaked it off as I turned away. I went in the living room and slung a couple of pillows on the floor so I wouldn't have to fall, could take it lying down. I got the gun out from behind the radio console where I'd hidden it and tossed it onto the pillows. She'd wondered why there was so much static all through supper. We didn't have the price of new tubes so she must have thought it was that.

It looked more like a relic than an up-to-date model. I didn't know much about guns; all I hoped was that he hadn't gypped me. The only thing I was sure of was it was loaded, and that was what counted. All it had to do was go off once.

I unhooked my shaving-mirror from the bathroom wall and brought that out, to see what I was doing, so there wouldn't have to be any second tries. I opened the little flap in back of it and stood it up on the floor, facing the pillows that were slated to be my bier. The movie wouldn't break up until eleven-thirty. That was long enough. Plenty long enough.

I went over to the desk, sat down, and scrawled her a note. Nothing much, just two lines. *"Sorry, old dear, too many bills."* I unstrapped my wristwatch and put it on top of the note. Then I started emptying out the pockets of my baggy suit one by one.

It was one of those suits sold by the job-lot, hundreds of them all exactly alike, at seventeen or nineteen dollars a throw, and distributed around town on the backs of life's failures. It had been carrying around hundreds of dollars—in money owed. Every pocket had its bills, its reminders, its summonses jabbed through the crack of the door by process-servers. Five days running now, I'd gotten a different summons each day. I'd quit trying to dodge them any more. I stacked them all up neatly before me. The notice from the landlord to vacate was there too. The gas had already been turned off the day be-

fore—hence the gun. Jumping from the window might have only broken my back and paralyzed me.

On top of the whole heap went the insurance policy in its blue folder. That wasn't worth a cent either—right now. Ten minutes from now it was going to be worth ten thousand dollars. I stripped off my coat, opened the collar of my shirt, and lay down on my back on the pillows.

I had to shift the mirror a little so I could see the side of my head. I picked up the gun in my right hand and flicked open the safety catch. Then I held it to my head, a little above the ear. It felt cold and hard; heavy, too. I was pushing it in more than I needed to, I guess.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and jerked the trigger with a spasmodic lunge that went all through me.

The impact of the hammer jarred my whole head and the click was magnified like something heard through a hollow tube or pipe—but that was all there was, a click. So he'd gypped me, or else the cartridges were no good and it had jammed.

It was loaded all right. I'd seen them in it myself when he broke it open for me. My arm flopped back and hit the carpet with a thud. I lay there sweating like a mule. What could have been easier than giving it another try? I couldn't. I might as well have tried to walk on the ceiling now.

Water doesn't reach the same boiling point twice. A pole-vaulter doesn't stay up in the air at his highest point more than a split second. I lay there five minutes maybe, and then when I saw it wasn't going to be any use any more, I got up on my feet again.

I slurred on my coat, shoved the double-crossing gun into my pocket, crammed the slew of bills about my person again. I kicked the mirror and the pillows aside and strapped on my wristwatch. I'd felt sorry for myself before. Now I had no use for myself. The farewell note I crumpled up, and the insurance policy, worthless once more, I flung violently into the far corner of the room. I was still shaking a little from the effects of the let-down when I banged out of the place and started off.

I found a place where I could get a jiggerful of very bad alcohol scented with juniper for the fifteen cents I had on me. The inward shaking stopped about then, and I struck on from there, down a long gloomy thoroughfare lined with warehouses that had railroad tracks running down the middle of it. It had a bad name, in regard to both

traffic and bodily safety, but if anyone had tried to hold me up just then they probably would have lost whatever they had on *them* instead.

An occasional arc-light gleamed funerially at the infrequent intersections. Presently the sidewalk and the cobbles petered out, narrowing into just the railroad right-of-way between low-lying sheds and walled-in lumber yards. I found myself walking the ties on the outside of the rails. If a train had come up behind me without warning, I would have gotten what I'd been looking for a little while ago.

I stumbled over something, went down, and skinned my palm on the rail. I picked myself up and looked. A train had already come up, it seemed, and somebody who hadn't been looking for it had gotten it instead. His body, huddled between two of the ties on the outside of the rail, had tripped me as I walked them. The head would have been resting on the rail itself if there had been any head left. I was glad it was so dark—you didn't have to see if you didn't want to.

I would have detoured around him and notified the first cop I came to, but as I started to move away my raised leg wasn't very far from his stiffly outstretched one. The trouser on each matched. The same goods, the same color gray, the same cheap job-lot suit. I reached down and held the two cuffs together with one hand. You couldn't tell them apart.

I grabbed him by the ankle and hauled him a little further away from the rail. Now he was headless all right.

I unbuttoned the jacket, held it open, and looked at the lining. Sure enough—same label, EAGLE BRAND CLOTHES. I turned the pocket inside out and it was the same size, a 36. He was roughly my own build as far as height and weight went. The identification tag in the coat was blank though—it had no name and address on it. I got a pencil out and I printed WALTER LYNCH, 35 MEADOWBROOK on it, the way it was on my own.

I was beginning to shake again, but this time with excitement. I looked up and down the tracks and then I emptied out every pocket he had on him. I stowed everything away without looking at it, then stuffed all my own bills in and around him. I slipped the key to the flat into his vest-pocket. I exchanged initialled belts with him. I even traded his package of cigarettes for mine—they weren't the same brand.

I'd come out without a necktie, but I wouldn't have worn that howler of his even if it was in mint condition. I edged it gingerly off

the rail, where it still lay in a loop, and it came away two colors, green at the ends, the rest of it garnet. I picked up a stray scrap of newspaper, wrapped it up, and shoved it in my pocket to throw away somewhere else.

Our shirts were both white, at least his had been until it happened. But anyway, all this wasn't absolutely necessary, I figured. The papers in the pockets would be enough. They'd hardly ask anyone's wife to look very closely at a husband in the shape this guy was. Still, I wanted to do the job up brown just to be sure. I took off my wristwatch and strapped it on him. I gave him a grim salute as I left him.

I left the railroad right-of-way at the next intersection, still without seeing anybody, and struck out for downtown. I was free as air, didn't owe anybody a cent—and in a couple of weeks from now there'd be ten-grand in the family.

I was going back to her, of course: I wasn't going to stay away for good. But I'd lie low first, wait till she'd collected the insurance money, then we'd powder out of town together, start over again someplace else with a ten-grand nestegg.

It was a cruel stunt to try on her, but she'd live through it. A few weeks of grief was better than being broke for the rest of our lives. And if I'd let her in on it ahead of time, she wouldn't have gone through with it.

I picked a one-arm restaurant and went in there. I took my meal-check with me to the back and shut myself up in the washroom. I was about to have an experience very few men outside of amnesia victims have ever had. I was about to find out who I was and where I hung out.

First I ripped the identification tag out of my own suit and sent it down the drain along with the guy's stained necktie. Then I started unloading and sorting out. Item one was a cheap mangy-looking billfold. Cheap on the outside, not the inside. I counted them. Two grand in twenties—brand new ones, not a wrinkle on them. There was a rubber band around them. Well, I was going to be well-heeled while I lay low, anyway.

Item two was a key with a six-pointed brass star dangling from it. On the star was stamped HOTEL COLUMBIA, 601. Item three was a bill from the same hotel, made out to "George Kelly," paid up a week in advance. Items four and five were a smaller key to a valise or bag and two train tickets. One was punched and one hadn't been



used yet. One was a week old and the other had been bought that very night. He must have been on his way back with it when he was knocked down crossing the tracks. The used ticket was from Chicago to here, and the one intended to be used was from here on to New York.

But "here" happened not to be in a straight line between the two. In fact, it was one hell of a detour to take. All that interested me, though, was that he'd come to town only a week ago and had been about to haul his freight out again tomorrow or the next day. Which meant it wasn't likely he knew anyone in town very well, so if his face had changed remarkably overnight, who would be the wiser—outside of the clerk at his hotel? And a low-tipped hat-brim would take care of that.

The bill was paid up in advance, the room-key was in my pocket, and I didn't have to go near the desk on my way in. I wanted to go over and take a look around Room 601 with the help of that other little key. Who could tell, there might be some more of those nice crisp twenties stowed away there. As long as the guy was dead anyway, I told myself, this wasn't robbery. It was just making the most of a good thing.

I put everything back in my pockets and went outside and ordered a cup of coffee at the counter. I needed change for the phone-call I was going to make before I went over there. Kelly, strangely enough, hadn't had any small change on him, only those twenties.

I stripped one off and shoved it at the counterman. I got a dirty look.

"That the smallest you got?" he growled. "Hell, you clean the till out just for a fi' cent cup of coffee?"

"If it's asking too much of you," I snarled, "I can drink my coffee some other place."

But it already had milk in it and couldn't be put back in the boiler. He almost wore the twenty out testing it for counterfeitness, stretched it to the tearing point, held it up to the light, peered at it. Finally, unable to find anything against it, he jotted down the serial number on a piece of paper and grudgingly handed me \$19.95 out of the cash register.

I left the coffee standing there and went over to call up the Columbia Hotel from the pay telephone on the wall. Room 601, of course, didn't answer. Still, he might be sharing it with someone, a woman for instance, even though the bill had been made out to him alone. I got the clerk on the wire.

"Well, is he alone there?" I asked. "Isn't there anybody rooming with him I can talk to?" There wasn't. "Has he had any callers since he's been staying there?"

"Not that I know of," said the clerk, "we've seen very little of him."

A lone wolf, eh? Perfect, as far as I was concerned.

By the time I got to the Columbia I had a hat, the brim rakishly shading the bridge of my nose. I needn't have bothered. The clerk was all wrapped up in some girl dangling across his desk and didn't even look up. The aged colored man who ran the creaking elevator was half blind. It was an eerie, motheaten sort of place, but perfect to hole up in for a week or two.

When I got out of the cage I started off in the wrong direction down the hall. "You is this way, boss, not that way;" the old man reminded me.

I snapped my fingers and switched around. "Need a road map in this dump," I scowled to cover up my mistake. He peered nearsightedly at me, closed the door, and went down. Room 601 was around a bend of the hall, down at the very end. I knocked first, just to be on the safe side, then let myself in. I locked the door again on the inside and wedged a chair up against the knob. This was my room now—just let anyone try to get in.

He'd traveled light, the late George Kelly. Nothing there but some dirty shirts over in the corner and some clean ones in the bureau drawer. Bought right here in town too—the cellophane was still on some and the sales slip lying with them. He must have arrived without a shirt to his back.

But that small key I had belonged to something, and when I went hunting it up I found the closet door locked and the key to it missing. For a minute I thought I'd overlooked it when I was frisking him down by the tracks, but I was sure I hadn't. The small key was definitely not the one to the closet door. It nearly fell through to the other side when I tried it. I could have called down for a passkey, but I didn't want to call attention to myself. Since the key hadn't been on him, and wasn't in the door, he must have hidden it somewhere around the room. Meaning he thought a lot of whatever was behind that door and wasn't taking any chances with it. I started to hunt for the key high and low.

It turned up in about an hour's time, after I had the big rug rolled up against the wall and the bed stripped down and the mattress

gashed all over with a razor blade and the whole place looking like a tornadó had hit it.

The funny little blur at the bottom of the inverted light-bowl overhead gave it away when I happened to look up. He'd tossed it up there before he went out.

I nearly broke my neck getting it out of the thing—had to balance on the back of a chair and tilt the bowl with my fingertips while it swayed back and forth and specks of plaster fell on my head. It occurred to me, although it was only a guess, that the way he'd intended to go about it was smash the bowl and let it drop out just before he checked out of the hotel.

I fitted the key into the closet door and took a gander.

There was only a small Gladstone bag over in the corner with a hotel towel over it. Not another thing, not even a hat or a spare collar. I hauled the bag out into the room and got busy on it with the small key I'd taken from his pocket. A gun winked up at me first of all, when I got it open. Not a crummy relic like the one I'd bought that afternoon, but a brand new efficient-looking affair, bright as a dollar. When I saw what it was lying on I tossed it aside and dumped the bag upside down on the floor and sat down next to it with a thump.

I only had to break open and count the first neat little green brick of bills. After that I just multiplied it by the rest. Twenty-one times two—very simple. Forty-two thousand dollars, in twenties—unsoiled and crisp as autumn leaves. Counting the two thousand the peculiar Mr. Kelly had been carrying around with him for pin-money and a few loose ones papering the bottom of the bag—he'd evidently broken open one pack himself—the sum total wasn't far from forty-five. I'd been painlessly run over and killed by a train to the tune of forty-five thousand dollars!

The ten-grand insurance premium that had loomed so big a while ago dwindled to a mere bagatelle with all this stuff lying in my lap. Something to light cigarettes with if I ran out of matches. And to think I'd nearly rung down curtains on myself for that! I could have hugged the chiseler that sold me that faulty gun.

But why go through with the scheme now? I had money. Let them keep the insurance. I would come back to life. It was all in cash too—good as gold wherever we went. *Better*—gold wasn't legal any more.

I jammed everything back into the bag, everything but the gun. That I shoved under one of the pillows. Let them find it after I was

gone. It was Kelly's anyway. I locked the bag, tossed it temporarily into the closet, and hurriedly went over his few personal belongings once more.

The guy didn't have a friend in the world seemingly. There wasn't a scrap of writing, a photograph, or anything to show who or what he was. He wasn't in his own hometown, the two railroad tickets told me that, so who was there to step forward and report him missing? That would have to come from the other end if at all, and it would take a long time to percolate through.

My title to the dough was clear to me in every sense but I now saw the mistake I'd made. I shouldn't have switched identities with him. I should have left him as he was, just taken the key to the bag, picked up the money, gone home, and kept on being Walter Lynch. No one knew he had the money. I wouldn't have even had to duck town. This way, I was lying dead by the tracks and if Ethel powdered out with me tonight it would look funny, and would most likely lead to an investigation.

I sat down for a minute and thought it out. Then it came to me. I could still make it look on the up-and-up, but she'd have to play ball with me. She would have to write a note addressed to me and leave it in the flat, saying she was sick of being broke and was quitting me cold. She'd get on the train tonight—alone—and go. That would explain her disappearance and also my "suicide"—down by the tracks. We'd arrange where to meet in New York. I'd follow her on a different train, taking care not to be seen getting on, and using the very ticket Kelly had bought. That way I didn't even have to run the risk of a station agent recalling my face later.

I was almost dizzy with my own brilliance. This took care of everything. My only regret was that I hadn't taken my suicide note to her. It would have been a swell finishing touch to have left it by the body. But her fake note at the flat would give the police the motive for the suicide if they were any good at putting two and two together. "And there I've been going around trying to convince employers I have brains!" I gloated.

She'd only just be getting back from the movie about now. There'd be nothing to alarm her at first in my not being there. I'd taken the gun out with me and the farewell note too. But she'd turn on the lights, maybe give the radio a try, or ask one of the neighbors if they'd seen me. She mustn't do any of those things—she was supposed to have gone long ago. I decided to warn her ahead over the

phone to lie low until I got there and explained, to wait for me in the dark.

I picked up the room phone and asked for our number. It was taking a slight chance, but it was better than letting her give herself away. She might stand by the brightly lighted window, looking up and down the street for me in full view of anyone happening along.

It rang just once and was promptly answered—much quicker than Ethel ever got to it. A deep bass voice said, "Yeah?" I nearly fainted.

"Yeah? What is it?" the voice said a second time. I pulled myself together. "I'm calling Saxony 4230," I said impatiently. "They've given me the wrong num—"

The answer came back, "This is Saxony 4230. What is it?" I put out one hand and leaned groggily against the table. "Who are you?" I managed to articulate.

"I'm a patrolman," he boomed back.

My face was getting wetter by the minute. "What's up?" I choked.

"You a friend of the Lynches? They've just had a death here."

Then in the background came a woman's screams—screams of agony from some other room, carried faintly over the wire. Blurred and distorted as they were, I recognized them—they were Ethel's. A second feminine voice called out more distinctly, presumably to the cop I was talking to: "Get her something to quiet her!" One of the neighbors, called in in the emergency.

Pop! went my whole scheme, like a punctured balloon. My body had already been found down by the tracks. A cop had already broken the news to her. He and the ministering neighbor were witnesses to the fact that she hadn't run off and left me *before* I did it.

The entire setup shifted back again into its first arrangement and left me where I'd been before. She couldn't leave town now, not for days—not until after the funeral anyway. The affair at the tracks was an accident once more, not a suicide. I daren't try to get word to her now, after making her go through this. She'd either give herself away in her relief—or uncontrollable anger might make her turn on me and expose me.

"Just a friend of theirs," I was saying. "I'll call back tomorrow—"

I heard the line click at the other end.

I forked the receiver as though it weighed a ton and slumped down next to it. It took me a little time to get my breathing back in shape. There was only one thing to do now—get out of town by myself without her. To stay out indefinitely was to invite being recognized by someone sooner or later, and the longer I stayed the greater the

chances were of that happening. I'd blow to New York tonight. I'd use Kelly's ticket, get the *Flyer* that passed through at midnight.

I stealthily eased the chair away from under the doorknob, picked up the bag, unlocked the door, and gave it a push. As though it was wired to set off some kind of an alarm, the phone began to ring like fury just as the door swung out. I stood thunderstruck for a minute. They'd traced my call back! Maybe Ethel had recovered enough to ask them to find out who it was, or maybe the way I'd hung up had been suspicious. Let it ring its head off. I wasn't going near it. I was getting out of here while the getting was good. I hotfooted it down the hall.

Just before I got to the turn in the hallway, the elevator door sloshed open. I stopped dead in my tracks. I could hear footsteps coming toward me along the carpet, softened to a shuffle. I hesitated for a minute, then ducked back into my room to wait for whoever it was to go by. I closed the door after me and stood listening by it, the phone still ringing shrilly behind me. The knock, when it came, was on my own door, and sent a quiver racing through me. I started to back away slowly across the room, the bag still in my hand.

The knock came again.

"What is it?" I called out.

It was the old colored man. "Mista Kelly, somebody wants you on the phone pow'ful bad. We tole 'em you must be asleep if you don't answer, but dey say wake you up. Dey say dey know you're here—"

I set the bag down noiselessly and looked at the window. No soap. Six stories above the street and no fire-escape, regulations to the contrary. The damn phone kept bleating away, nearly driving me crazy.

"Mista Kelly—"

I pulled myself together. A voice on the phone wasn't going to kill me. "All right," I said curtly.

If they knew I was here, then they knew I was here. I'd bluff it out—be a friend of the late Lynch's that his wife had never heard about. I took in a chestful of air, picked up the receiver, and said, "Yep?"

The voice was very cagey, almost muffled. "Getting restless, Hogan?" Hogan? First I was Lynch, then I was Kelly, now I was Hogan! But it wasn't much trouble to figure out Kelly and Hogan wore the same pair of shoes—I'd never had much confidence in the names on hotel-blotters in the first place.

"Sorta," I shadow-boxed. "Kelly's the name, though."

The voice went in for irony by the shovelful. "So we noticed," he drawled. Meaning about my being restless, evidently, and not what my name was. "You got so restless you were figuring on taking a little trip without waiting for your friends, is that it? Seems you even walked down to the depot, asking about trains, and bought yourself a ticket ahead of time. I had a phone call from somebody that saw you, about eight this evening. I s'pose you woulda just taken an overnight-bag—" a pause "—a little black bag, and hopped aboard."

So others besides Kelly knew what was in that Gladstone! That was a nice cheering thought.

The voice remonstrated with a feline purr: "You shouldn't be so impatient. You knew we were coming. You shoulda given us more time. We only got in late this afternoon." Another pause. "Tire trouble on the way. We woulda felt very bad to have missed you. It woulda inconvenienced us a lot. You see, you've got my razor in your bag, and some shirts and socks belonging to some of the other boys. Now, we'd like to get everything sorted out before you go ahead on any little trips because if you just go off like that without letting us know you never can tell when you'd be coming back."

I could almost feel the threat of the words flash out of the receiver into my ear like a steel blade. He was talking in code, but the code wasn't hard to decipher, and wasn't meant to be. They wanted a split of what was in the black bag. Maybe they were entitled to it and maybe they weren't, but they sounded like they were going to get it, whoever they were. Kelly, I gathered, had been on the point of continuing his travels without waiting for that little formality—only he'd taken the back way to and from the depot to avoid being seen, had been seen anyway, and then a freight train had come along and saved him any further trouble. But since I was now Kelly, his false move had gotten me in bad and it was up to me to do the worrying for him.

I hadn't said two words so far. I already had a dim suspicion in the back of my mind about where, or rather how, all that crisp new money had been obtained. But that thought could wait until later. All I knew was there wasn't going to be any split, big or little—just one look at my face was all they'd need and I'd be left with only memories.

I had one trump card though—they couldn't tag me. I could walk right by them with the whole satchelful of dough and they wouldn't

know the difference. All I needed was to stall a little, to keep them from coming up here.

"You've got me wrong," I murmured into the phone. "I wouldn't think of keeping anyone's razors or shirts or socks—"

"Can't hear you," he said. "Take the handkerchief off the thing, you don't need it." He'd noticed the difference in voices and thought I was using a filter to disguise mine.

"You do the talking," I suggested. "It was your nickel."

"We don't talk so good with our mouths," he let me know. "We talk better with other things. You know where to find us. All that was arranged. But you got a poor memory, it looks like. Check out and come on over here—with everything. Then we'll all see you off on the train, after everything's straightened out."

Another of those threats flashed out—I sensed instinctively what Kelly's "seeing off" would be like if he had been fool enough to go near them at this point. He was in too bad to redeem himself. He'd never make that New York train standing on his own feet.

"How soon do you want me to be over?" I stalled.

The purr left the voice at this point. "We'll give you thirty minutes." Then, while the fact that a net was closing in on me slowly sank in, he went on: "I wouldn't try to make the depot without stopping by here first. Couple of the boys are hanging around there in the car. They like to watch people get off the trains. They like to watch them get off much better than they like to watch 'em get on. Funny, isn't it?"

"Yeah, funny," I agreed dismally.

"You're in 601 over at that dump," he told me. "You can see the street from there. Step over to the window for a minute, I'll hold the wire—"

I put down the receiver, edged up to the window, took a tuck in the dusty curtains, and peered down. It was a side-street, not the one the hotel entrance faced on. But at the corner, which commanded both the window and the entrance, a negligent figure slouched under the white sputtering arc-light—hat-brim down, idly scanning a newspaper. While I watched he raised his head, saw me with the light behind me, stared straight up at the window. Unmistakably my window and no other. I let the curtains spread out again and went back to the phone.

"Like the view?" the voice at the other end suggested. "Nice quiet street, hardly anyone on it, right?"

"Nice quiet street, hardly anyone on it," I intoned dazedly.



"Then we'll be seeing you in twenty-five minutes now." The line clicked closed, but not quickly enough to cut off a smothered monosyllable. "Rat," it had sounded like.

All of which left me pretty well holed-in. I knew the penalty now for trying to get on the New York train, or any other. I knew the penalty for simply walking away from the hotel in the wrong direction. I knew the penalty for everything, in fact, but one thing—for staying exactly where I was and not budging.

And what else could that be but a little surprise visit on their part, preferably in the early morning hours? This place was a push-over with just a night-clerk and an old myopic colored man. I certainly couldn't afford to call in police protection any more than the real Kelly could have.

There was always the alternative of dropping the bag out the window and letting that finger-man out there pick it up and walk off with it intact, but I wasn't quite yellow enough to go for that idea. Forty-five grand was forty-five grand—why should a voice on the wire and a lizard on a street corner dish me out of it? The postman may knock twice, but not opportunity.

The obvious thing was to get out of 601 in a hurry. I split the phone for the third time that night. "This is Kelly in six-oh-one. I'd like my room changed. Can you gimme an inside room on the top floor?"

The broad I'd seen him with must have put him in good humor. "That shouldn't be hard," he said. "I'll send the key up."

"Here's the idea," I went on, "I want this transfer kept strictly between you and me—I don't want it on the blotter. Anyone stops by, I'm in 601 as far as you know. They don't find me there, then I'm not in the building."

"I don't see how I can do that—we've got to keep the record straight," he said for a come-on.

"I'm sending a sealed envelope down to you," I said. "You open it personally. I'll keep 601—keep paying for it—if that'll make it easier for you. I'm in a little personal trouble, my wife is after me and I don't want any callers. You play along with me and you won't come out the short end. Send the elevator man up with the key."

When the old darky knocked, I left the black bag in the closet, locked 601 after me, and took the key with me. The lights were out and he didn't notice the dummy I'd formed out of Kelly's shirts under the bedding—nor the bulge all those packages of twenties gave my

person. The bag was full of rolls of toilet-paper to give it the right weight, if snatched up in a hurry. They wouldn't be likely to show their faces a second time after filling a perfectly good mattress with lead in the middle of the night and rousing the whole hotel.

Kelly's dandy little gun I took with me.

The elevator man showed me into a place on the eighth floor back with a window that looked out on a blank brick shaft. I had him wait outside the door for a minute while I put three of the twenties into an envelope, sealed it for the clerk, and told him to take it down to him.

"Yes, Mr. Kelly," he said.

"No—Mr. Kelly's down in 601, there's no one in this room," I told him, giving him a twenty for himself. "You ask your boss downstairs if you don't believe me. He'll put you right. You didn't show me up here—this is so you remember that."

His eyes bulged when he looked at the tip.

I locked the door, but didn't bother with any mere chair this time. I sealed it up with a big top-heavy chest of drawers that weighed a ton.

The room had its own bath. I stretched out on the bed fully dressed with the money still on me, the gun under my pillow, and lay in the dark waiting.

I didn't have such a long wait at that. The firecrackers went off at about three in the morning. I could hear it plainly two floors above, where I was. It sounded like the guts were being blown out of the building. The shots came so close together I couldn't count them—there must have been three or four revolvers being emptied at one time. All into Kelly's rolled-up shirts, in the dark.

The whole thing was over in less than five minutes. Then, minutes after, like one last firecracker on the string going off, there came a single shot, much further away this time. It sounded as though it came from the lobby—either a cop had tried to head them off or they'd taken care of the clerk on their way out.

The keening of police-cars, whistling up from all directions at once, jerked me upright on the bed. I hadn't thought of that. They'd want to know what all the shooting was for. They'd want to ask the guy who'd been in 601 a lot of questions, especially after they saw the proxy he'd left on the bed to take his medicine for him. They'd want to know why and wherefore, and how come all that money, and the nice shiny gun, was it licensed? Lots and lots of questions that Kelly-Hogan-Lynch was in no position to answer.

It behooved me to dodge them every bit as much as my would-be murderers. It was out for me. Now was the time for it anyway. Kelly's friends would lie low until the police had cleared away. It was now or never, while the police cars were keeping them away.

I rolled the chest of drawers aside, unlocked the door, and squinted out. The building was humming with sounds and voices. I went back for the gun, laid it flat against my stomach under my shirt, with my belt to hold it up, buttoned my coat over it, and started down the hall. An old woman opened her door and gawked. "What was that down below just now?"

"Backfiring in the street," I said reassuringly, and she jumped in again.

The elevator was just rising flush with the floor. I could see the light and had an idea who was on it. I dove down the fireproof stairs next to it. They were screened by frosted-glass doors on each floor.

When I got down to the sixth, there was a shadow parked just outside, on the hall side—a shadow wearing a visored cap. There was no light on my side. The lower half of the door was wood. I bent double, slithered past without blurring the upper glass half, and pussyfooted on down.

The other four landings were unguarded as yet. The staircase came out in the rear of the lobby, behind a potted plant. The lobby was jammed, people in bathrobes milling about, reporters barging in and out of the two rickety phone booths the place boasted, plain-clothesmen and a cop keeping a space in front of the desk clear.

Over the desk, head hanging down on the outside, dangled the clerk, showing his bald-spot like a target, with a purple-black sworl in the exact middle of it. Outside the door was another cop, visible from where I was. I took the final all-important step that carried me off the staircase into the crowd. Someone turned around and saw me. "What happened?" I asked, and kept moving.

A press photographer was trying to wedge himself into one of the narrow coffinlike booths ahead of two or three others. Evidently he doubled as a reporter, newspaper budgets being what they are. He unlimbered the black apparatus that was impeding him and shoved it at me.

"Hold this for me a sec," he said, and turned to the phone and dropped his nickel in. I kept moving toward the door, strapped the camera around my own shoulder as I went, and breezed out past the cop in a typical journalistic hurry.

"Hey, you!" he said—then "Okay. Take one of me, why don'tcha?"  
"Bust the camera," I kidded back.

I unloaded it into an ashcan the minute I got around the corner and kept going.

I was all the way acrosstown from the Columbia when the first streak of dawn showed. The gun and the packs of twenties were both weighing me down and I was at the mercy of the first patrolman who didn't like my shape. But this was no time of night to check in at a second hotel. The last train in or out had been at midnight and the next was at seven. I had never realized until now how tough it was getting out of a town at odd hours—especially when you were two guys, neither one of whom could afford to be recognized. I had no car. A long-distance ride in a taxi would have been a dead giveaway—the driver would only have come back and shot his mouth off. To start off on foot wasn't the answer, either. Every passing car whose headlights flicked me stemming the highway would be a possible source of information against me later.

All I needed was about an hour or an hour and a half until I could get that New York train. Kelly's friends might still be covering the station, police or no police, but how were they going to pick me out in broad daylight? I certainly wasn't wearing Kelly's face, even if I was wearing his clothes. But the station waiting-room was too conspicuous a spot. The way to do it was to hop on at the last minute when the train was already under way.

I saw a light through plate glass and stopped into another of those all-night beaneries—sitting in there was a shade less risky than roaming the streets. I went as far to the back as I could, got behind a bend in the wall, and ordered everything in sight to give myself an excuse for staying a while. It was all I could do to swallow the stuff, but just as I'd about cleaned it up and had no more alibi left, a kid came in selling the early morning editions. I grabbed one and buried my nose in it.

It was a good thing I'd bought it. What I read once more changed the crazy pattern of my plans.

"I" was on the last page, just two or three lines buried in the middle of a column of assorted mishaps that had taken place during the previous twenty-four hours. I'd been found dead on the tracks. I was thirty-three, unemployed, and lived at 35 Meadowbrook. And that was that.

But the murder at the Columbia Hotel was splashed across page

one. And Mr. George Kelly was very badly wanted by the police for questioning, not only about who his callers had been so they could be nailed for killing the clerk, but also about brand new twenty-dollar bills that had been popping up all over town for the past week or more. There might be some connection, the police seemed to feel, with a certain bank robbery in Omaha. Kelly might be someone named Hogan, and Hogan had been very badly wanted for a long time.

Then again, Kelly might not be. The descriptions of the twenty-dollar-bill spendthrift that were coming in didn't always tally, but the serial numbers on his money all checked with the list that had been sent out by the bank.

The picture of Kelly given by a haberdashery clerk who had sold him shirts and by the station-agent who had sold him a ticket to New York didn't quite line up with that given by the elevator boy at the hotel nor a counterman who'd sold him java he hadn't drunk—except that they all agreed he was wearing a light-gray suit.

The colored man's description, being the most recent and detailed, was given more credence than the others. He had rubbed elbows with Kelly night and day for a week. He was just senile enough and frightened enough not to remember that I had looked different the first six days of the week from what I had the seventh.

And then at the tag end, this: all the trains were being watched and all the cars leaving town were being stopped on the highway and searched.

So I was staying in town and liking it. Or to be more exact, staying in town whether I liked it or not. A stationery store across from the lunchroom opened up at eight and I ducked in and bought a light-tan briefcase. The storekeeper wasn't very well up on his newspaper reading—there wasn't any fuss raised about the twenty I paid for it with any more than there had been in the eating place I'd just left. But the net was tightening around me all the time. I knew it, yet I couldn't do anything about it. I'd just presented them with two more witnesses to help identify me. I sent him into the back room looking for something I didn't want and got the money into the briefcase—it didn't take more than a minute. The gun I had to leave where it was. I patted myself flat and walked out.

There was a respectable-looking family hotel on the next block. I had to get off the streets in a hurry, so I went in there, and they

sold a room to James Harper. My baggage was coming later, I explained. Yes, I was new in town.

Just as I was stepping into the elevator ahead of the bellhop, someone in hornrimmed glasses brushed by me getting off. I could feel him turning around to look after me, but he wasn't anyone I knew, so I figured I must have jostled him going by.

I locked my new door, shoved the briefcase under the mattress, and lay down on top of it. I hadn't had any sleep since two nights before. Just as I was fading out there was a slight tap at the door. I jacked myself upright and reached for the gun. The tap came again, very genteel, very apologetic.

"Who is it?" I grated.

"Mr. Harper?" said an unctuous voice.

That was my name, or supposed to be. I went up close to the door and said, "Well?"

"Can I see you for a minute?"

"What about?" I switched a chair over, pivoted up on it, and peered over the transom, which was open an inch or two. The man with glasses who'd been in the lobby a few minutes ago was standing there. I could see the whole hall. There wasn't anyone else in it. I jumped down again, pushed the chair back, hesitated for a minute, then turned the key and faced him.

"Harper's the name all right," I said, "but I think you've got your wires crossed, haven't you? I don't know you."

"Mr. Harper, I represent the Gibraltar Life Insurance Company here in town. Being a new arrival here, I don't know whether you've heard of us or not—" I certainly had. Ethel had ten thousand coming to her from them. He was way past the door by now. I closed it after him and quietly locked him in the room with me. He was gushing salestalk. My eyes never left his face.

"No, no insurance," I said. "I never have and never will. Don't believe in it, and what's more I can't afford it—"

"There's where you're wrong," he said briskly. "Let me just give you an instance. There was a man in this town named Lynch—"

I stiffened and hooked my thumb into the waistband of my trousers—that way it was near the opening of my shirt.

He continued, "He was broke, without a job, down on his luck—but he did have an insurance. He met with an accident." He spread his hands triumphantly. "His wife gets ten thousand dollars." Then very slowly, "As soon as we're convinced, of course, that he's dead."

Smack, between the eyes!

"Did you sell him his policy?" I tried to remember what the salesman who'd sold me mine looked like. I was quivering inside like a vibrator.

"No," he said, "I'm just an investigator for the company but I was present when he took his examination."

"Then if you're an investigator," I said brittlely, "how can you sell me one?"

"I'll be frank with you," he said with a cold smile. "I'm up here mainly to protect the company's interests. There's a remarkable resemblance between you and this Lynch, Mr. Harper. In fact, downstairs just now I thought I was seeing a ghost. Now don't take offense, but we have to be careful what we're doing. I may be mistaken, of course, but I have a very good memory for faces. You can establish your own identity, I suppose?"

"Sure," I said truculently, "but I'm not going to. What's all this got to do with me anyway?"

"Nothing," he admitted glibly. "Of course, his widow is in desperate need and it will hold up the payment to her indefinitely, that's all. In fact, until I'm satisfied beyond the shadow of a doubt that there hasn't been any—slipup."

"What'll it take to do that?"

"Simply your word for it, that you are not Walter Lynch. It's just one of those coincidences, that's all."

"If that's all you want, you've got it. Take my word for it, I'm not." I tried to laugh as if the whole thing was preposterous.

"Would you put that in writing for me?" he said. "Just so my conscience will be clear, just so I can protect myself if the company says anything later. After all, it's my bread and butter—"

I pulled out a sheet of hotel stationery. "What's the catch in this?" I asked.

His eyes widened innocently.

"Nothing. You don't have to put your signature in full if that's what's worrying you. Just initial it. 'I am not Walter Lynch, signed J.H.' It will avoid the necessity for a more thorough investigation by the company—"

I scrawled it out and gave it to him. He blotted it, folded it, and tore off a strip before he tucked it in his wallet.

"Don't need the second half of the sheet," he murmured. He moved toward the door. "Well, I'll trot down to the office," he said. "Sorry I can't interest you in a policy." He turned the key without seeming to notice that the door had been locked and went out into the hall.

I pounced on the strips of paper he'd let fall. There were two of them. "*I am not—*" was on one and "*J.H.*" on the other. I'd fallen for him. He had my own original signature, standing by itself now, to compare with the one on file. He suspected who I was!

I ran out after him. The elevator was just going down. I rang for it like blazes, but it wouldn't come back. I chased back to the room, got the briefcase, and trooped down the stairs. When I came out into the lobby he'd disappeared. I darted out into the street and looked both ways. No sign of him. He must have gone back to his own room for a minute. Just as I was turning to go in again, out he came. He seemed surprised to see me, then covered it by saying, "If you ever change your mind, let me know."

"I have," I said abruptly. "I think I'll take out a policy after all. Is that your car?"

His eyes lighted up. "Good!" he said. "Step in. I'll ride you down to the office myself, turn you over to our ace salesman." I knew what he was thinking, that the salesman could back him up in his identification of me.

I got in next to him. When the first light stopped him I had the gun out against his ribs, under my left arm.

"You don't need to wait for that," I said. "Turn up the other way—we're lighting out. Argue about it and I'll give it to you right here in the car."

He shuddered a little and then gave the wheel a turn. He didn't say anything.

"Don't look so hard at the next traffic cop you pass," I warned him once. When we got out of the business district, I said "Take one hand off the wheel and haul the signature out of your wallet." I rolled it up with one hand, chewed it to a pulp, and spit it out in little soggy pieces. He was sweating a little. I was too, but not as much.

"What's it going to be?" he quavered. "I've got a wife and kids—"

"You'll get back to them," I reassured him, "but you'll be a little late, that's all. You're going to clear me out of town. I'll turn you back alone."

He gave a sigh of relief. "All right," he said, "I'll do whatever you say."

"Can you drive without your glasses?" He took them off and handed them to me and I put them on. I could hardly see anything at first. I took off the light-gray coat and changed that with him too. The briefcase on my lap covered my trousers from above and the car door from the side.



"If we're stopped and asked any questions," I said, "one wrong word out of you and I'll give it to you right under their noses, state police or no state police."

He nodded, completely buffaloed.

The suburbs petered out and we hit open country. We weren't, newspapers to the contrary, stopped. A motorcycle cop passed us coming into town. He just glanced in as he went by, didn't look back. I watched him in the mirror until he was gone. Twenty miles out we left the main highway and took a side road, with fewer cars on it. About ten minutes later his machine started to buck.

"I'm running out of gas," he said.

"See if you can make that clump of trees over there," I barked. "Get off the road and into it. Then you can start back for gas on foot and I'll light out."

He swerved off the road, bumped across grassy ground, and came to a stop on the other side of the trees. He cut the engine and we both got out.

"All right," I said, "now remember what I told you. Keep your mouth shut. Go ahead, never mind watching me."

I stood with one elbow on the car door and one leg on the running-board. He turned and started shuffling off through the knee-deep grass. I let him get about five yards away and then I shot him three times in the head.

He fell and I couldn't see him in the grass, just a sort of hole there where it was pressed down. I looked around and there wasn't anyone in sight on the road, so I went up to him and gave him another one right up against his ear to make sure.

I got back in the car and started it. He'd lied about the gas—I saw that by looking at the meter. It was running low, but there was enough left to get back on the road again and make the next filling station.

When I'd filled up, an attendant took the twenty inside with him and stayed in there longer than I liked. I sounded the horn and he came running out.

"I can't make change," he said.

"Well, keep it then!" I snapped and roared away.

I met the cops that his phone call had tipped off about ten minutes later, coming toward me, not after me. Five of them—too many to buck. I'd thrown the gun away after leaving the gas station, and I

was sitting on the briefcase. I braked and looked innocently surprised.

"Driver's license?" they said. I had the insurance fellow's in the coat I was wearing.

"Left it home," I said.

They came over and frisked me, and then one of them took it out of my pocket. "No you didn't," he said, "but it's got the wrong guy's description on it. Get out a minute."

I had to. Two of them had guns out.

"Your coat don't match your trousers," he said drily. "And you ought to go back to the optician and see about those glasses. Both sidepieces stick out about three inches in back of your ears." Then he picked up the briefcase and said, "Isn't it uncomfortable sitting this way?"

He opened it and looked in. "Yeah," he said, "Hogan," and we started back to town, one of them riding with me with my wrist linked to his. The filling-station fellow said, "Yep, that's him," and we kept going.

"I'm Walter Lynch," I said. "The real Hogan died down by the tracks. I took the money from his room, that's all—changed places with him. Maybe I can go to jail for that, but you can't pin a murder rap on me. My wife will identify me. Take me over to 35 Meadowbrook—she'll tell you who I am!"

"Better pick a live one," he said. "She jumped out a window early this morning—went crazy with grief, I guess. Don't you read the papers?"

When we got to the clump of trees, they'd found the insurance guy already. I could see some of them standing around the body. A detective came over and said, "The great Hogan at last, eh?"

"I'm Walter Lynch," I said.

The detective said, "That saves me a good deal of trouble. That insurance guy, lying out there now, put in a call to his office just before he left his hotel—something about a guy named Lynch trying to pull a fast one on the company. When he didn't show up they notified us." He got in. "I'll ride back with you," he said.

I didn't say anything any more after that. If I let them think I was Hogan, I went up for murder. If I succeeded in proving I was Lynch, I went up for murder anyway. As the detective put it on the way to town, "Make up your mind who you wanna be—either way y'gonna sit down on a couple of thousand volts."

Georges Simenon

## The Tracy Enigma

The telephone rang one night around eleven, and we decided to take the train an hour later. These are, in brief, the facts that led G.7 to this sudden decision:

That very day, at four in the afternoon, the inhabitants of Tracy, a very small village on the banks of the Loire, saw the body of a young girl floating down the river.

They fished it out from a small boat. Though there was no sign of life, a vineyard worker drove off to Pouilly to fetch a doctor, who worked in vain at artificial respiration for two hours. The girl did not revive. No one recognized her. The mayor was away. The Rural Guard was not available, there were no police. The police corporal from Pouilly was on his rounds through the region and couldn't arrive until the next day.

The railroad watchman had a small unused shack behind his house. They put the body there. At sundown the crowds dispersed.

Around ten in the evening the watchman left his house to signal a freight train. As he passed by the shack where the body had been laid, he was astonished to observe that the door, which he himself had closed, was ajar.

Frightened, he sought out his wife. They approached with a lantern, peered through the opening . . .

The body had vanished! There was nothing in the shack!

We reached the town by six in the morning, and from the station we could see the shack and the peasants excitedly clustered about it.

The village of Tracy lies on the right bank of the Loire, at a spot where the river widens and is bestrewn with large sand islands. Across from the village you can see the chateau of Sancerre, but it's a long way around to the suspension bridge which leads to the chateau and to Saint-Satur, so that the village is relatively isolated.

The people whom we could see were almost all workers from the vineyards. Some of them, alerted by the watchman, had spent the night on the road on the lookout for the police.

The Pouilly police had arrived shortly before us. Now they were

engaged in general questioning, which was producing confused results.

One fact was certain: the girl, after two hours of artificial respiration, had shown no sign of life and the doctor had unhesitatingly signed the death certificate.

But one old boatman had troubled the spirits of his listeners by relating the story of a curious event he had once witnessed: the daughter of a river boatman had fallen into the stream during her father's absence and had not been fished out till an hour later; two doctors had declared her dead; the father had come back, hurled himself on his child's body, and devoted himself to breathing life back into her for all of ten hours; the girl finally, bit by bit, had come back. . . .

It would be impossible to describe the effect of this narrative. Suddenly the people began to tremble, and the watchman kept his eyes fearfully averted from the shack.

G.7 had seen no reason to announce his official position. We were there simply as curious spectators—to listen to everything and see everything. Though it was August and the weather had been dry for two weeks, a few from the crowd were persistently trying to find prints in the hard-baked dirt of the road.

The corporal of police had no notion what to do. He kept taking notes on whatever anyone wished to tell him and had blackened page after page of his notebook.

Around ten in the morning came the first startling development. A carriage arrived from Loges, another village much like Tracy situated four kilometers upstream. A large woman emerged in great distress.

She cried out. She wept. She groaned. An old peasant followed her in silence.

"It was my daughter, wasn't it?"

Someone began to describe the drowned girl and her clothes. The people argued; they couldn't agree on the color of her hair. But there was no possible doubt: the drowned girl was Angélique Bourriau, whose parents had just arrived from Loges.

The father was so crushed by the discovery that he could not speak a word. He stared about stupidly. But the mother talked enough for two, her voice shrill and voluble.

"It's a trick of that Gaston's, for sure . . ."

People began to listen. They learned that Angélique, who was

nineteen, had been smitten with a clerk in the tax office at Saint-Satur, a youth who hadn't a sou to his name, hadn't even performed his military service yet.

Of course the Bourriais opposed the marriage. They had their eye on another bridegroom, a worker from the Pouilly vineyards, a solid rustic of thirty. The marriage was to have taken place two months later.

G.7 and I were the first to reach Saint-Satur, leaving police, parents, and spectators still clustered around the empty shack.

It was eleven when we entered the Tax Collector's office. The clerk who greeted us at the window was Gaston himself—Gaston Verdurier, to give him his proper name.

He was a tall young man of twenty, with feverish eyes, and lips that trembled at the slightest emotion.

"Please come outside for a moment."

"But—" Verdurier pointed at the clock, which was far short of the noon hour.

"Would you rather I talked here? It's about Angélique."

The clerk hastily seized his cap and followed us outside.

"What time was it when you left her yesterday afternoon?"

"But—what do you mean? I didn't see her."

"You loved her, didn't you?"

"Yes . . ."

"She loved you?"

"Yes."

"You didn't want her to belong to another?"

"It isn't true!"

"What? What isn't true?"

"I didn't kill her!"

"But you knew something about it?"

"No. Yes. They found her, didn't they?"

"Yes, they found her. And in a few moments the police will be here."

"Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. What do you know? Why did you insist, before I gave any hint of my business, that you didn't kill her?"

"Because I knew Angélique would never accept that marriage. She kept telling me she'd sooner die."

"And you?"

We were crossing the suspension bridge. Far away we could see the red roofs of Tracy.

"Me? I was going crazy."

"Did you work in your office yesterday afternoon? Don't bother to lie; I can ask your boss."

"No. I asked for time off."

"And you saw Angélique."

"Yes. Near Loges. We went for a walk together."

"When you left her, she was alive?"

"Yes!"

"And you didn't see anybody lurking around? Grosjean, for instance—that is the name of the man she was supposed to marry, isn't it?"

"I didn't see him . . ." The young man was gasping with anguish, his face sweating, his lips white. "Are we going to see her?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Oh. We're going to—" He stopped.

"Well? Haven't you the guts to go through with it?"

"Oh, yes! I— But you've got to understand . . ." And suddenly he burst out sobbing.

G.7 let him weep. He said not another word to him until we arrived at the watchman's house, where the crowd parted to let Gaston Verdurier through.

The young man hid his face in his hands. He asked, "Where is she?"

But already the girl's mother was vehemently apostrophizing him and the scene was beginning to grow chaotic, at once tragic and grotesque.

The police corporal intervened. "He'll answer for this at Pouilly!" he said, seizing the youth by the wrist.

Verdurier was mad with suffering. I think I have never seen a human face so tortured. His eyes sought ours as though he counted on us to rescue him.

"I didn't kill her, I swear it!" he shouted as they pushed him into a cart to take him to the city.

And when the cart was a hundred meters away you could still hear his sobs.

All this had happened so rapidly and in so curious an atmosphere that I had not even tried to form an opinion of the case.

You could have shown me the girl restored to life and I shouldn't

have been surprised. You could have told me that her official fiancé had killed her and I shouldn't have lifted an eyebrow.

It was a splendidly sunny day. The watchman's white house glistened.

The people couldn't decide to break up. The confusion of the parents, who had no idea even where their child's body might be, had something intensely dramatic about it, despite the farcical sidelights of the situation.

G.7 had not yet stepped forward officially. He looked about him. He listened.

"All right," he said suddenly to the old boatman who had told the story of the girl brought back to life. "You weren't at Saint-Satur yesterday evening?"

"Sure. I live there."

"And you didn't go to the café?"

"I dropped in for a drink. But why do you want to know?"

"You told your story there?"

"What story?"

G.7 had apparently heard enough. He turned his back indifferently and signaled me to follow him.

"No hurry," he said. "There's a train for Pouilly at two. In the meantime we've time to lunch at the inn and sample the local white wine."

"But—"

"But what?" he asked in the most natural manner, merely as though we'd come down here for a breath of country air and a taste of the local products.

So I knew that he had just reached the solution of the case.

Two hours later we sat facing Gaston. His head hung low, his glance was evasive as he obstinately defended himself against the accusations of the police captain.

There were tears in his eyes. His face was marked with purple spots. His nails were gnawed to the quick.

"I didn't! It isn't true!" he sobbed with a mixture of rage and humility. "I didn't kill anybody!"

"No." G.7's voice was calm. "You didn't even kill yourself."

I was far from understanding that remark, but Gaston started, and stared at my friend sharply, with a maddened glint in his eye.

"How—how do you know?"

There was a bitter smile on G.7's lips, a terribly human smile.

"All I had to do was look at you and I understood. Understood that at the last moment you wouldn't have the guts. The last kiss—the last embrace—the desire to die rather than give each other up! Angélique leaps into the river—and then you, suddenly coming to your senses, watch her float off downstream, draw back, and stand there, motionless, a chilling fear in your heart."

"Shut up!"

"That evening, at Saint-Satur, you drop in at the café. You need a drink to calm you. There's a man there, telling a horrible story. They've fished a girl out of the river at Tracy. They think she's dead. But he's got his own ideas, he has. He knew a case like that once. You listen. You're trembling all over. Maybe you imagine Angélique being buried alive. You rush outdoors. You get to Tracy. You steal her body and carry her off into the woods. You try to bring her back—

"At least, that's what I want to believe. It's better that way, isn't it? You stole the body to redeem yourself. It couldn't have been to make sure that Angélique *was* dead? That she couldn't come back and accuse you of cowardice?"

The young man let out a cry of horror.

"But she was dead enough," G.7 went on. "Dead for good." He lowered his voice. "All right. Tell us where you left her."

And outside, five minutes later, he took a deep breath and sighed. "I don't know why but I'd sooner have been handling a good nasty crime."

Like me, no doubt, he felt a certain weight oppressing his chest as two policemen accompanied the twenty-year-old lover toward the woods.

(translated by Anthony Boucher)



Ellis Peters

## Maiden Garland

I never wanted to tell this story, and I hope nobody ever reads it, but I know only one way of getting rid of it, and this is it. I used to write a bit, even poetry sometimes, before I married Molly and came and settled in here as the local copper. She didn't want to leave these parts—for some reason those who stick it here until past twenty-five never do—and I wanted her. And here we still are, and shall be, world without end. But there are worse places. And anything I write that isn't an official report can always be burned. There are a lot of ways of exorcising the past, all effective, given the goodwill.

The thing is, they never should have sent a girl like Kirsten to a village like this. It's like giving barbaric children a nuclear warhead to play with. Maybe you don't know what sort of place a Twentieth Century village can be. All up the western fringes you'll find us, very much in the modern world but not of it, sometimes in contact, sometimes isolated, every house complete with refrigerator and television, up to the minute with Bingo and pop and everything that's going, a miniskirt on every girl, winter or summer, and the backlog of the pre-Christian calendar still setting light to the spring and autumn equinoxes for us, whatever time we observe.

You think such places can't survive? You haven't been following the activities of British Rail, have you? They closed the only line that came within trekking distance of us seven years ago, ripping up the rails and selling off the stations, blasting the bridges and tarring over the level crossings, so that nobody should even be able to shove a wheelbarrow along the tracks to us when things got rough. The very winter they sealed us off, things did get rough. Every winter since we've been cut off for days at a time, sometimes as long as a week.

We back onto the Welsh hills—a moderate snowfall and we're on our own. Only helicopters can reach us. Twice since then they've had to use them to drop supplies. In a small country! But the TV still brings us the Eurovision song contest! We know what's going on, we never miss a trick. We receive but we can't transmit. That's

the world we've got, God help us, sophisticated to the nth degree, and half the time forgotten of God and man.

But they gave us a couple of small factories, so that we could keep a handful of the young. The rest leave us as soon as they finish school, and never come back. We intermarry because we haven't much choice. We develop a very distinct type, square brown men and thick-hipped, thick-legged, spry dark women, sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, prolific and self-contained, of strong character and intolerant habit.

But we do also develop various new ties with the world. The antiques business spreads like a disease, picking off our scattered country houses. The thing is to buy a small period place to live in, deploy your wares around the reception rooms among your won furniture, and wait for the weekend wanderers to find their way in. We had a couple called Landon who had taken Cleave Court, stuck a flamboyant notice at the gate, and filled the place with fashionable Victorian junk. They came from town, and fitted in nowhere; and because they had a two-year-old infant they brought with them a Norwegian *au pair* girl. They were no sensation to us, not even the foreign girl—we'd seen everything.

Everything except Kirsten Sivertsen.

We'd seen exotics, too, of course, the summer migrants came through in all shapes and sizes and kinds, but they only came and passed. This one stayed. Even if we'd had one or two leggy blondes of our own she might have been less obtrusive. But I doubt it. It wasn't the fairness or the length of her, or the sea-blue eyes or the straight, wide stare and the open smile that made her dynamite. It was something inside that wore all these as a dress.

Kirsten was nineteen, and ripe as the ripe apricot she resembled when she arrived in the summer, all golden tan and startling mermaid eyes and pale, bright primrose hair. She was taller than most of our village males, high-breasted and fearless and friendly, with an Amazon's walk that showed off those long, long legs of hers, and her shapely and sinewy ankles and feet. You watched her stride past, and your own knees turned to water. And when you looked straight into the sea-blue stare—and if ever you spoke to her you had to, for she could and would have looked a tiger innocently in the eye—you drowned.

So that was what the Landons brought into Cleave Court with them, and them as ornery a pair as you could find in an ephemeral and slightly shady business. He was a townie to his finger-ends,

playing at being a sort of subsquire with commercial connections, a big fleshy bloke with thinning black hair and a moist eye. When I first saw him I wondered how his wife ever came to hire a girl like Kirsten; but I think it was her sheer bland vanity that made her blind to the possibilities. She was a blonde, too, I suppose not yet thirty, but a string-colored blonde with no sap in her, everything about her slightly withered, though to give her her due she had good enough features, and was the type to look much the same at sixty as she did at thirty. But alongside Kirsten she vanished; it was as simple as that.

A novelty is a novelty, and at first the whole village took up Kirsten and made itself attentive to her, the women ahead of the men. They asked her to join this and that, they invited her to tea; and Kirsten responded, up to a point—the point where she got bored. There was no doubt about it, women in the mass were not for her. She preferred the company of men any day, and pretty soon the women noticed it. That did it. They drew off warily and really looked at her. Then they looked at their menfolk, and saw what by that time they expected to see.

A timebomb, that was Kirsten. At first we never even noticed the clock ticking. But before Christmas we all knew, and we were all waiting for the explosion.

I reckon within three months she'd been out with every young fellow in the place, and a good few not so young, provided they were unattached, and sometimes even if they were very firmly attached. There'd been more than one fight over her by then. When they fought she shrugged and walked away, losing interest. If she'd joined in I calculate she could have settled which way most of the fights would go, without even ruffling her hair. But she didn't like upsets, she liked everything to be sunny. I suppose she was hardly ever known to pass up an opportunity or refuse a date. She smiled on everybody alike, looking them straight in the eye and drowning them in that private ocean of hers; and I doubt if it ever dawned on her how the women had drawn off and closed their faces against her. Seen from behind the shutters, her very walk was provocation, her body a blatant challenge. Kirsten was pure sex. How she could have the face to be devout into the bargain, and go regularly to church, was something that baffled them completely.

Kirsten went home for Christmas, and the female half of the village prayed she wouldn't come back, and the male half agonized, hoping that she would. And she did, in the New Year when the first

heavy snow was receding. Our Mildred was one of the first to see her after her return. They met in Dr. Clegg's waiting-room, and I remember Mildred going on about her afterwards, how Kirsten told her she'd had a bit of trouble after the jet flight over, and Mrs. Landon had sent her to Clegg because she said no irregular hemorrhage should be neglected, but Mildred's theory was that that was a coverup for something very different, and what was the betting the Landons would soon be shipping her off home again in a hurry, before her condition began to show? Which will indicate to you the state of female feeling at that time. If she had begun to display signs of pregnancy, there wasn't a married or engaged woman in the place who wouldn't have been giving her man hell. Including our Mildred. She isn't a bad-looking girl at all, after our dark, squat fashion, but it was a sad day when young Ted Blantyre from the garage up at Croft started measuring her lumpy legs against Kirsten's magnificent underproppings, and let Mildred catch him at it.

Whether anything ever got round about that rumor I can't say. It never did to me from any other source; but after Christmas there was something new in the tension that centered round Kirsten. All the men were like cocks preening and strutting in a sort of premature spring. The kids first, and after them plenty who should have known better, started boasting openly of their sexual revelations with her. It was the done thing to have had Kirsten. And, my God, one could believe that to have had her would be an experience out of this world, like matching with a Valkyrie. And through all the hates and rivalries engendered by her she walked radiantly as ever, flaunting her high breasts and her pale hair and her grand, brazen face, with the white-hot passion of men and women following her, and scorching the very footprints she left behind her.

Then came the night of the big snow, in February. All our roads out were blocked completely. We no longer have a railway, as I've said. But by this time, like our ancestors—and we get closer to them every season—we know enough to stock up before the winter closes in, and have developed ways of surviving.

Snow couldn't keep Kirsten indoors. She came from a country of winter and darkness. There was a dance that night in the Institute; and Kirsten loved to dance. She walked from Cleave. The snow had hardly begun then; there was a sharp wind blowing, and minor drifts were building up, but she strode through them like a goddess, uncorted and unafraid, with her dancing shoes in the outside handbag on her arm, and her marvelous legs cased in thigh-boots.

The first I knew of the affair was when the phone rang at one o'clock in the morning. I crawled out and went down to the office, and it was Mrs. Landon on the line, clipped and shrill, very uneasy.

"Oh, Sergeant Moon, I'm so sorry to get you up at this hour, but we're so worried about Kirsten. She hasn't come in yet. The dance was to end at midnight, wasn't it? And with this blizzard, anything could happen. My husband had to abandon the car at Miller's Corner, and walk all the way from there, and he's been back as far as the main road since, and along the lane, and not a sign of her. I'm so anxious . . ."

Landon had been at a sale in Shrewsbury, it seemed, and only made it back home around half past twelve, since when he'd struggled part of the way toward the village in search of his missing nursemaid, with no luck. And by that time blizzard was the word for what we had, a horizontal northeaster that was flaying the open surfaces bare and burying the vulnerable places fathoms deep. One gets to know where all the marooned cars will be, and where the sheep will huddle in the hills. Between us and Cleave, I could have numbered the stretches where a homing girl might founder.

"Stay up," I said, "and we'll work our way out to you. Someone here may know if anyone started home with her."

I wouldn't have left a dog out without hunting for him that night. I knocked up our two constables, and Joe Egan from next door, and young Ted, because our Mildred gave me a sort of claim on him, and anyhow he'd been at the dance, and would hardly be in bed yet. He came down to us clumping in rubber thigh-boots, ready for anything, and stared at us pallidly from under a cut eyebrow when he heard Kirsten's name.

"She went off early," he said, "hardly turned eleven. On her tod. She shoulda been home long since."

We went to look for her, two of us the shorter way by the fields, three the long way by the road and the lane, because even Kirsten must have had some respect for such weather. Visibility was nil by then. There was no air, just a shifting veil of snow, driving parallel with the ground. We shoved our way crosswise through it, sprouting icicles and breathing snow. And all the way I was thinking of Kirsten disseminated into air, enlarged to fill the night, afloat over us on the tension of the withering wind. But she was flesh and blood like the rest of us, and the cold could kill even the marvelous winter women of the north, even her.

We'd hardly started Buller and Crowe and Joe Egan off by the

road, and shoved our way fifty yards up the field behind the vicarage, when the church bell started to toll.

You'd have thought it was a gun trained on us, the way Ted and me pulled up standing. Six bells our church has, but this was just one of them, the biggest, banging out slow, single strokes. Nobody has to tell our natives what a passing bell is, we still toll for our people when they go. Some other customs we've shed only since the last war. Give us ten more years, and this one will be gone after the rest, but not yet.

I turned and made for the church, slithering down the slope in a hurry. The doors are never locked, night or day, summer or winter. It's a tradition with us. I was pounding up the path to the porch when the reverberations of the last stroke shook away into the silence and left the nave still quivering. One rope was still swaying gently when I turned the torch on it. There was nobody there. I listened and there was no sound. I went all round the place. The vestry door was unlocked, too. The bell-ringer could have been anywhere by that time. Maybe one of the youngsters, too lit to go home after the dance— But, no, not on a night like this, I thought. They're witless, but not that witless.

Whoever he was, he was gone. And we had a girl to find. We went back to the job of finding her. Everything else could wait.

It took us three hours to find her. We made it to the Cleave drive, and Landon met us there, plastered white, and shaking like a leaf inside his big shaggy coat. We separated again in all directions, inside the grounds and out. Though if she'd ever got that far she would have made it to the door.

No, it was out in the lane, a quarter of a mile away, that we found her at last, drawn back into the corner of a field gate. The wind had shifted a point to the north and started demolishing the drifts it had built. Powdered snow came off the dune like spume. A hem of dark cloth showed that had been hidden before.

We uncovered her, digging with our hands. She lay on her back with her face turned up to us, and her head at an impossible angle. There were fingermarks on her throat, but she hadn't died of strangulation, and her face, startled, indignant, frozen in outraged alarm, wasn't marred. Her clothes were tumbled and torn, but she had put up fight enough to preserve everything but her life. It wasn't the cold that had killed Kirsten. Her neck was broken. Her nails weren't going to tell us anything, either; she had on sheepskin mitts, elasticized at the wrists. Her big handbag lay against the gate. It hadn't

been touched; we never entertained the idea that it would have been. Nobody had wanted to rob her. There was, after all, only one way Kirsten was likely to die.

We got the private door of the Cleave gardens off its hinges and lifted her onto it to carry her back to the village. There was hardly any snow under her, the grass and the ground showed through; she must have been lying there since before midnight. We staked a tarpaulin over the place where she'd lain. By morning that would be buried, too, the way the snow was still coming down, but we knew now where to find what evidence there was.

It wasn't far off morning when we got her back to the police station. A proper mortuary we haven't got, but we'd made shift more than once when we were cut off in other winters and had to dig dead men out of their buried cars. I knew the roads would be closed. I didn't know; until I tried the telephone, that the outside line would be down, but it was. We were on our own with this murder; and for that it was the first time.

Molly was up and waiting for us, and so was Mildred. Not a soul in the place could have slept through that bell tolling. Nobody said much, but Molly's eyes followed me about the place wherever I went, and Mildred's followed young Ted, and didn't miss the split eyebrow or the bruises that were coming up on his cheekbone and chin, or the look in his eyes that took no account of her watching him. He knew she was there in the room, pouring tea, and that was about all she meant to him. He'd just seen the last of Kirsten.

I left them gulping tea and went down to the village to get Dr. Clegg. He was our local G.P. from years back, and used to carrying the total load when we were isolated, and in any case the official police surgeon was ten miles away and out of reach. He came down grumbling like a grizzly bear—and looking a bit like one, too, with his brindled hair on end and a huge, brown woolen dressing-gown draped round him—and wanted to know what I thought I was doing getting him up so early, after two late calls the night before and Mrs. Dent's baby due any minute. When he heard, he went back upstairs without a word, and was down in two minutes, dressed and ready. There was no wife to complicate his comings and goings; she'd been dead for thirty years, died soon after he married her. Jenny Crowther did for him, days, and a sister from Birmingham came over now and again to see that everything was in order. He'd never looked at any woman again, bar professionally.

He didn't ask what had happened to Kirsten. What could have



happened to her but a passionate sexual assault that turned fatal? Women like her don't die of old age or accidents, or freeze submissively in any weather. When we got back to the station he took his bag into the mortuary room back of the office—it used to be a cell once—and shut the door after him.

So then there were just the four of us sitting round our kitchen table over another pot of tea, Molly and Mildred on one side, young Ted and me on the other. Buller was in the office typing a preliminary report, Crowe had gone off to see the M.C. from last night's dance, and Joe Egan had slipped home to get ready for work, because Joe is a cowman, and cows won't wait.

I said, "Now suppose you tell us what happened at the dance last night before we hear it from someone else. You might as well—we can see the scars, and if you don't talk, *she* will." And Mildred didn't say a word. When girls keep their mouths shut, look out. They'd gone to the dance together, that I knew. She'd been home soon after eleven, by herself. And when did Ted ever fight over our Mildred?"

He looked up at her, and she looked back at him, and you'd have said there went any prospects of that marriage ever coming off, but the next minute you'd have sworn, with more conviction, they'd never get free of each other as long as they lived. Love or hate, comfort or kill, they'd never claw their way loose. And when I took one quick glance at Molly she was staring straight at me and, my God, her face looked just the same.

"He pinched her off me," young Ted said. He looked at Mildred and looked through her. "I'd asked her for that dance, what business did he have shoving his face in? Across the floor like a shot, the minute the band struck up, and had her out on the floor before I could get near."

"It was *me* you took there," said Mildred in a thin voice, "remember?"

"I'd asked her for this one dance. How many did I have with you? And he cut in on me . . ."

"And she let him," Mildred said, and laughed.

"He?" I said.

"George Tranter. He pinched her from me . . ."

His voice went up, higher and higher, keening without tears. He stared into my girl's eyes and told us all about it, how they'd fought on the dance floor until they were hustled out, and then in the snow. And when the fight was over, and they were both marked and disheveled, and both feeling pretty stupid, back they'd gone into the



Institute, and Kirsten wasn't there any more. Kirsten had shrugged her shoulders and walked out, bored with their adolescent tantrums.

"Did you follow her?" I asked.

He looked down into his linked hands on the table and said, "Yes, as far as the stile up the fields. It was snowing hard, and blowing like hell. She wasn't anywhere. She'd gone by the road. I knew it was no good. I went back."

And Mildred had left, too, of course, supposing he even noticed. And that would be about—what?—eleven-thirty at the latest?

"So what did you do then? Go back to the dance?"

But maybe George Tranter had also set off after her as soon as he realized she had walked out on them, and maybe he went by the road. All inflamed with his wrongs and his battle, ready to confront her as Ted had been ready. And Kirsten so large and fair and scornful, Venus ankle-deep among her puny admirers!

Harry Clegg came in through the office, so quietly that we almost didn't notice him, and sat down wearily in the corner by the fire, and reached for the teapot.

"I went back again," Ted said in a low, even voice, watching our Mildred with every word. "By the road, this time. I went after her, and I overtook her. I told her I loved her and always should as long as I lived, like she bloody well knew without being told, ever since we'd first been together. I told her I didn't care how many others there'd been, but there weren't going to be any others ever again, only me. I told her I'd see her dead first . . . and she said, then I'd have to, wouldn't I? *And I did!* She was laughing at me, and then she choked and crumpled up in my hands with her head all on one side. And I kissed her, and she never moved or breathed. *I killed her!*" said young Ted, and his voice was thin and low and chilly, and all the time he was looking with narrowed eyes at our Mildred. "I dropped her there in the gateway, and left her lying. I killed her! Now charge me!"

I could have asked him how he managed the dead-bell from fifty yards up the field, but I never said anything, and nobody else did, either. He looked across at Harry Clegg, warming himself at the fire, and he said, "Her neck was broken, wasn't it? *Well, wasn't it?*" He was a hefty youngster, he knew his own strength all right.

"That's right," Harry said mildly, "her neck *was* broken. That's what she died of. If it matters, it was quick. And most likely accidental."

"Accidental! Like trying to take her—right there in the snow?"

"Then I suppose," Harry said in the same tone, "the child she was carrying was yours?"

Everybody saw Ted go rigid, and everybody saw him recover. After all, nobody'd ever *known* before. "Yes, it was mine," he said. His tone said: "Whose else would it be?"

Harry said heavily and absolutely, in a tired voice: "*She was a virgin.*"

We didn't rightly hear, or we didn't rightly understand, not for a moment. No, it was impossible! That creature all devilment and provocation and allure, the magnet that had dragged at us all—

Ted was the first to admit anything, because Ted knew. He gave one hopeless look round the lot of us, and his bruised face crumpled. He put his head down in his arms on the kitchen table and burst into tears. Poor kid, he'd never had anything from her, she'd never known she owed him anything, and now she was out of reach forever. Out of reach of all of us. She'd sheared clean through all our pretensions with her terrible honesty, to make her exit in triumph. Kirsten was a virgin!

"There's no doubt?" I asked.

"What do you take me for?" said Harry. "They'll all swear the opposite. Let them! They're all liars, every one. You all had her labeled. Well, you'll all have to get used to a new label. I tell you the girl was a virgin."

I knew him, and I knew it was the truth. "You'd better get home, lad," I said to Ted, "and sleep it off."

What can you make of women? Mildred cooked breakfast for him. I'd have sworn he wouldn't touch it, but he ate it and looked round for more. Mildred walked him home, and probably saw him to bed, too, and all the time with that closed look of triumph and revenge on her face. And it was Mildred who called the garage and told them he wouldn't be in that day. And he bore it all, and never hit her. The makings of a marriage there, after all. Of a sort! Not so unusual a sort, God help us!

I don't know which of them gave the show away, but the grapevine had the news about Kirsten before the day was out, and something queer was going on among our snowbound womenfolk. Suddenly Kirsten emerged a heroine. Every woman in the place walked round with a countenance of secret, vengeful joy, eyeing her man as the priest eyes the sacrifice. The girls glowed in silent exultation, the village Romeos slunk into hiding. Everybody knew they were fools, dupes, and liars, and Kirsten after her death an ally and champion

of her sex, outstanding in the war against men. Who had shaken and shamed them as she had?

You think you've seen the sex war in action? You don't know the half. You had lifelines on the world, we had none. You knew ways out of the closed circle, we went round and round on a treadmill from which there was no escape. And then, you never knew Kirsten.

Mind you, nobody admitted to knowing anything. We had at least a veil of silence and decency. Until the next day, which was Sunday.

Unless you know a church like ours, you won't understand. Parts of it are Saxon, parts Norman, the newest bits Gothic from the Fourteenth Century, and it clings to every tradition from Alfred on down. A leper squint? There's one in the south porch. A swordstand? We've got that, too, and not one but two thirteen-sconce cressets, from the days when the church was lit by oil flares in stone bases. And hanging high on the wall of the south aisle we keep twelve maiden garlands. You don't know what they are? Neither did I when I first came here. They're crude crowns of paper flowers on wire frames, with white paper glove-shapes pinned into them, and white ribbons with the names of the girls they commemorate. Girls who died virgin, spinsters of this parish. Our latest is dated July 5, 1934, Emily Weston, aged 18. The oldest, gone dingy brown and brittle as ash with age, dates back to 1780, but the name's faded clean away, and we don't know who she was.

But this Sunday morning there were not twelve crowns, but thirteen, and against the dusty dimness of the other twelve the last one exploded like a Roman candle. All the plastic daffodils and tulips from all the packets of washing powder in the village had gone into the making of that garland, not to mention a real pair of white nylon gloves. There was a white ribbon dangling from the apex where the bars of flowers met, and a name inked on it. Too high to be readable—they must have brought in a ladder to put the thing in place—but nobody needed to ask whose maiden crown that was.

The show of color nearly stopped the choir in its tracks and ripped the processional hymn ragged. The vicar turned whiter than his surplice. He was a man, too. Maybe he hadn't joined the hunt, but not because he hadn't heard the horns calling. Every woman in church—and there were many more than usual—glowed with terrible triumph and disdain; they were all in the know, every one of them. All the men drew in their heads like tortoises and shrank over their hymnbooks, remembering their idiot brags and struttings, and knowing the women were remembering them, too.

So now it was out in the open. Every marriage was going to be a silent battlefield, and every engagement total war.

We got through morning service somehow. After everybody'd gone I wanted to take the thing down, on the pretext that it might be evidence, but the vicar wouldn't have it. He stood there like Horatius keeping the bridge, staring through the church wall and away to where some inward vision showed him Kirsten still; and he said in a great voice:

"She was a virgin, and she is there by right." And I knew that nobody was going to find the courage to displace Kirsten's memorial.

There was nothing for it but to get on with the job like the day before, the hard way. We put in a long day of it, going doggedly from house to house, checking the movements of every man in the place from just after eleven on that Friday night. In the village itself it wasn't so bad, but when it came to the farms and scattered farm cottages around, we had to dig our way through to meet the locals digging themselves out. Mercifully it didn't snow again. But we got back late in the evening with sore feet and aching legs, and a list as long as my arm of men who might have killed Kirsten. Not forgetting Landon, who had made his way home alone and on foot after midnight; or George Tranter, who had never gone back to the dance after the fight, and hadn't been heard letting himself in at home, so that no one could confirm the time he gave; or for that matter young Ted, though I was pretty sure that his being right there beside me when the bell began to toll let him out. Still, it didn't *have* to be the murderer who rang for her, even if it was a ninety-percent certainty.

Ted was with Mildred in our front room, heaven help him, but I think he was even glad of her. Better somebody who knew the whole of it, he hadn't got any farther to fall, and with a wall at his back he could begin to fight back. Having Molly sit down opposite me at the kitchen table with a book she wasn't even pretending to read had the same effect on me. Nobody had any secrets around here any more; she knew every time the image of Kirsten strode across my mind, and every time I went down into the sea of her eyes. She watched me going through my list of males, and smiled terrifyingly.

"You'd do better asking the women all those questions," she said, and it was the first remark she'd volunteered all that day. "They might get you somewhere. You can cross off all those stupid kids who went about flexing their muscles and pretending they'd had the

mastery of that girl. Which of 'em did she ever let come near enough even to guess whether she was a virgin? Not even the last!"

And she was right. When it came to imagining the final collision between Kirsten and her murderer, how many of our lads matched up? Eighty percent of them she could have pulverized with one hand. This one she had fought till she died, and he'd never got his way.

"How could he know," said Molly, slamming her book shut and leaning over the table at me with her eyes narrowed as if she hated my guts, as maybe she did, "how could he know she was a virgin? As soon as he realized he'd killed her he dropped her and ran. It wasn't then he found out—oh, dear, no! This one happened to know already!"

"He didn't have to know at all," I said. "Everybody in the place knows now, you women have seen to that, but nobody'd decorated the poor girl with a plastic halo then. He didn't have to know."

"Oh, no?" she said. "*He rang the bell for her, didn't he?*"

"What's that got to do with it, for God's sake?" I said. "He knew she was dead, that's for sure."

"He knew more than that. He had to! And he was the only one who did, then. What sort of copper are you?" she said, spitting like a cat. "Never thought to count the strokes, did you? Six tolls that bell gave. I know it, if you don't. Six was the peal for a girl who died virgin. You may have forgotten it, but he didn't. And he knew it was her due! And nobody else did! Nobody would have believed you then if you'd suggested it, would they? But he *knew*!"

I got up from the table and walked across the room to the door like a wound-up mechanical doll. As I passed her she was going on as if she didn't know how to stop, like the beginning of a big thaw: "Who's the one person who *could* know? Not a lover! That's the whole point, isn't it, that she never had a lover, that she wouldn't have let one of the lot of you touch her that way . . . All that seeming brazenness of hers that got her her bad name—all just what it seemed, if we could have believed it, just honesty and friendliness and trust. Only she was too innocent, and too fearless."

I shut the door on her and walked away slowly down the road. It was dark, and the east wind was still blowing, whisking a fine spray of snow off the roofs, but suddenly it seemed as if the edge was off the frost.

The one person who *could* have known! Had Molly thought of that by herself, or had Mildred reminded her?

Harry Clegg was just coming rushing out of his gate in a hurry

when I got there, with his bag in his hand, clumping in his huge Wellingtons. He pulled up when he saw me, but only in the brisk way of somebody checking for an instant before continuing his flight.

"Looking for me? The Dent baby's on its way in a hurry at last, her mother just sent for me."

"Can't keep the Dent baby waiting," I said. "When you get back I'll be sending for you, too, Harry. I'd like a fuller report. On Kirsten."

Then he settled, letting his big coat droop round him like a crow folding its wings. He heaved a sort of quiet sigh, and stood looking at me with a half relieved, half resigned smile. And in a moment he said: "What was it? Not that it could have been any other way in the end. I'd have told you, just as soon as the road's open and we can get another medical man in."

"It was the bell," I said. "Six tolls for a virgin."

"You got round to that finally. I wonder," he said, "if that's why I rang it. It could have been. I wonder!"

"Not me," I said. "It took the women to put a finger on that."

"Well, I'm not sorry," he said gently. "Let me take care of Joan and her baby, and then if the weather report's right I reckon the telephone line may be working and the road open tomorrow." And he stood there quiet for a minute, and then suddenly he said, quite conversationally, but in a voice I can't forget: "I'm a live man, too. They don't realize . . ." And after another minute: "I never knew it could happen to me. She shouldn't have been let out alone, she must always have had her death on a short lead, walking on her heels. I was on my way home from a damn-fool call up at Coulters'—woman's a fool, hysterical if she cuts her finger. Kirsten—I picked her out of the drifts, and steered her back in the right direction, and I never knew it could happen to me, not till she put her arms round me in pure gratitude, not knowing there was anything to be afraid of . . . That was her trouble, she never knew she was deadly. She didn't even know she was playing with fire."

I thought of all the years of abstinence, and of Kirsten clinging to him in the snow, hugging him, laughing, her hair whipped across his face, and her high breasts crushed against him, an innocent without the sense to put a guard on her devastating friendliness. And who was the victim and who the destroyer I shall never know.

"Better get along to Joan," I said.

And he said: "I'll call you afterwards," and went off headlong in the dark to his job.

He called me in the small hours. The baby was a boy, and mother

and child were as fit as frogs, and he was at my disposal. I said: "It'll keep till morning," and he said: "I'll be here."

I went round in the morning. I took my time. He was dead, sitting in his surgery with an empty glass at his elbow.

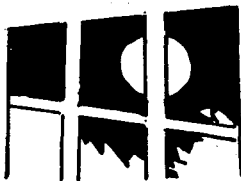
The only announcement we made about it was that Dr. Clegg had died suddenly. There'd have to be an inquest, of course, and they'd have to find that he'd taken his own life, but nobody in our village would ever say a word to suggest that his suicide was connected with Kirsten's death. And after a few days' interval we could make the formal announcement that the murder case was closed to the police's satisfaction, and no prosecution was contemplated.

Everybody would know, of course, but we don't tell all we know. Not even to one another.

The thaw began that day, the doctors from the next village could get through to us, and the outside phone lines were working again. Molly looked at me as though she hadn't slept well, but wasn't blaming me for it. The women began, slowly and carefully, to speak civilly to their men again, and life felt its way cautiously into gear and went on where it had left off. The thaw began, a slow thaw but a sure one. Come Easter I reckon Mildred and young Ted will be getting married.

It might be better, in a way, to take down that thirteenth maiden garland and burn it, but nobody ever will. Nor will anybody ever own to knowing anything about it when the stray summer visitor asks. She lived here and died here, and we won't excise her from our memories though we may from our mouths. As long as any of us survive who lived through her catastrophic impact, she will remain a legitimate part of our history and our experience. But one we don't talk about either to strangers or among ourselves.

So now I suppose I'd better write "Finis" to this story, and then put a match to it.





## Scrimshaw

She suggested liquid undulation: a lei-draped girl in a grass skirt under a windblown palm tree, her hands and hips expressive of the flow of the hula. Behind her, beyond the surf, a whaling ship was poised to approach the shore, its square-rigged sails bold against a polished white sky.

The scene was depicted meticulously upon ivory: a white fragment of tusk the size of a dollar bill. The etched detail was exquisite: the scrimshaw engraving was carved of thousands of threadlike lines and the artist's knife hadn't slipped once.

The price tag may have been designed to persuade tourists of the seriousness of the art form: it was in four figures. But Brenda was unimpressed. She put the piece back on the display cabinet and left the shop.

The hot Lahaina sun beat against her face and she went across Front Street to the Sea Wall, thrust her hands into the pockets of her dress, and brooded upon the anchorage.

Boats were moored around the harbor—catamarans, glass-bottom tourist boats, marlin fishermen, pleasure sailboats, outrigger canoes, yachts. Playthings. It's the wrong place for me, she thought.

Beyond the wide channel the islands of Lanai and Kahoolawe made lovely horizons under their umbrellas of delicate cloud, but Brenda had lost her eye for that sort of thing; she noticed the stagnant heat, the shabbiness of the town, and the offensiveness of the tourists who trudged from shop to shop in their silly hats, their sunburnt flab, their hapless T-shirts emblazoned with local graffiti: "Here Today, Gone to Maui."

A leggy young girl went by, drawing Brenda's brief attention: one of those taut tan sunbleached creatures of the surfboards—gorgeous and luscious and vacuous. Filled with youth and hedonism, equipped with all the optional accessories of pleasure. Brenda watched gloomily, her eyes following the girl as far as the end of the Sea Wall, where the girl turned to cross the street. Brenda then noticed two men in conversation there.

One of them was the wino who always seemed to be there: a stringy unshaven tattered character who spent the days huddling in the



shade, sucking from a bottle in a brown bag and begging coins from tourists. At night he seemed to prowl the alleys behind the seafood restaurants, living off scraps like a stray dog: she had seen him once, from the window of her flyspecked room, scrounging in the can behind the hotel's kitchen; and then two nights ago near a garbage bin she had taken a short cut home after a dissatisfying lonely dinner and she'd nearly tripped over him.

The man talking with the wino seemed familiar and yet she could not place the man. He had the lean bearded look of one who had gone native; but not really, for he was set apart by his fastidiousness. He wore sandals, yet his feet seemed clean, the toenails glimmering; he wore a sandy beard but it was neatly trimmed and his hair was expensively cut, not at all shaggy; he wore a blue-denim short-sleeved shirt, fashionably faded, but it had sleeve pockets and epaulets and had come from a designer shop; and his white sailor's trousers fit perfectly.

I know him, Brenda thought, but she couldn't summon the energy to stir from her spot when the bearded man and the wino walked away into the town. Vaguely and without real interest she wondered idly what those two could possibly have to talk about together.

She found shade on the harborfront. Inertia held her there for hours while she recounted the litany of her misfortunes. Finally hunger bestirred her and she slouched back to her miserable little third-class hotel.

The next day, half drunk in the afternoon and wilting in the heat, Brenda noticed vaguely that the wino was no longer in his usual place. In fact, she hadn't seen the wino at all, not last night and not today.

The headache was painful and she boarded the jitney bus to go up-island a few miles. She got off near the Kapalua headland and trudged down to the public beach. It was cooler here because the northwest end of the island was open to the fresh trade winds; she settled under a palm tree, pulled off her ragged sneakers, and dug her toes into the cool sand. The toes weren't very clean. She was going too long between baths these days. The bathroom in the hotel was at the end of the corridor and she went there as infrequently as possible because she couldn't be sure who she might encounter and anyhow, the tub was filthy and there was no shower.

Across the channel loomed the craggy mountains of Molokai, infamous island, leper colony, its dark volcanic mass shadowed by

perpetual sinister rain clouds, and Brenda lost herself in gruesome speculations about exile, isolation, loneliness, and wretched despair, none of which seemed at all foreign to her.

The sun moved and took the shade with it and she moved round to the other side of the palm tree, tucking the fabric of the cheap dress under her when she sat down. The dress was about gone—frayed, faded, the material ready to disintegrate. She only had two others left. Then it would be jeans and the boatneck. It didn't matter, really. There was no one to dress up for.

It wasn't that she was altogether ugly; she wasn't ugly; she wasn't even plain, really; she had studied photographs of herself over the years and she had gazed in the mirror and tried to understand, but it had eluded her. All right, perhaps she was too bony, her shoulders too big, flat in front, not enough flesh on her—but there were men who liked their women bony; that didn't explain it. She had the proper features in the proper places and, after all, Modigliani hadn't found that sort of face abominable to behold, had he?

But ever since puberty there'd been something about her gangly gracelessness that had isolated her. Invitations to go out had been infrequent. At parties no one ever initiated conversations with her. No one, in any case, until Briggs had appeared in her life.

... She noticed the man again: the well-dressed one with the neatly trimmed beard. A droopy brown Hawaiian youth was picking up litter on the beach and depositing it in a burlap sack he dragged along; the bearded man ambled beside the youth, talking to him. The Hawaiian said something; the bearded man nodded with evident disappointment and turned to leave the beach. His path brought him close by Brenda's palm tree and Brenda sat up abruptly. "Eric?"

The bearded man squinted into the shade, trying to recognize her. Brenda removed her sunglasses. She said, "Eric? Eric Morelius?"

"Brenda?" The man came closer and she contrived a wan smile. "Brenda Briggs? What the devil are you doing here? You look like a beachcomber gone to seed."

Over a drink in Kimō's she tried to put on a front. "Well, I thought I'd come out here on a sabbatical and, you know, loaf around the islands, recharge my batteries, take stock."

She saw that Eric wasn't buying it. She tried to smile. "And what about you?"

"Well, I live here, you know. Came out to Hawaii nine years ago on vacation and never went back." Eric had an easy relaxed attitude

of confident assurance. "Come off it, duckie, you look like hell. What's happened to you?"

She contrived a shrug of indifference. "The world fell down around my ankles. Happens to most everybody sometimes, I suppose. It doesn't matter."

"Just like that? It must have been something terrible. You had more promise than anyone in the department."

"Well, we were kids then, weren't we. We were all promising young scholars. But what happens after you've broken all the promises?"

"Good Lord. The last I saw of you, you and Briggs were off to revitalize the University of what, New Mexico?"

"Arizona." She tipped her head back with the glass to her mouth; ice clicked against her teeth. "And after that a state college in Minnesota. And then a dinky jerkwater diploma mill in California. The world," she said in a quiet voice, "has little further need of second-rate Greek and Roman literature scholars—or for any sort of non-tenured Ph.D.'s in the humanities. I spent last year waiting on tables in Modesto."

"Duckie," Eric said, "there's one thing you haven't mentioned. Where's Briggs?"

She hesitated. Then—what did it matter?—she told him: "He left me. Four years ago. Divorced me, and married a buxom life-of-the-party girl fifteen years younger than me. She was writing advertising copy for defective radial tires or carcinogenic deodorants or something like that. We had a kid, you know. Cute little guy, we named him Geoff, with a G—you know how Briggs used to love reading Chaucer. In the original. In retrospect, you know, Briggs was a prig and a snob."

"Where's the kid, then?"

"I managed to get custody and then six months ago he went to visit his father for the weekend and all three of them, Briggs and the copy-writer and my kid Geoff, well, there was a six-car pileup on the Santa Monica Freeway and I had to pay for the funerals and it wiped me out."

Eric brought another pair of drinks and there was a properly responsive sympathy in his eyes and it had been so long since she'd talked about it that she covered her face with the table napkin and sobbed.

"God help me, Eric. Briggs was the only man who ever gave me a second look . . ."

He walked her along the Sea Wall. "You'll get over it, duckie. Takes time."

"Sure," she said listlessly. "I know."

"Sure, it can be tough. Especially when you haven't got anybody. You don't have any family left, do you?"

"No. Only child. My parents died young. Why not? The old man was on the assembly line in Dearborn. We're all on the assembly line in Dearborn. What have we got to aim for? A condominium in some ant-hill and a bag full of golf clubs? Let's change the subject, all right? What about you, then? You look prosperous enough. Did you drop out or were you pushed, too?"

"Dropped out. Saw the light and made it to the end of the tunnel. I'm a free man, duckie."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a scrimshander."

"A what?"

"A bone-ivory artist. I do scrimshaw engravings. You've probably seen my work in the shop windows around town."

Eric's studio, high under the eaves in the vintage whaler's house that looked more New Englandish than tropical, revealed its owner's compulsion for orderly neatness.

She had never liked him much. He and Briggs had got along all right, but she'd always found Eric an unpleasant sort. It wasn't that he was boorish; hardly anything like that. But she thought him pretentious and totally insincere. He'd always had that air of arrogant self-assurance. And the polish was all on the surface; he had the right manners but once you got to know him a little you realized he had no real understanding of courtesy or compassion. Those qualities were meaningless to people like Eric. She'd always thought him self-absorbed and egotistical to the point of solipsism; she'd felt he had cultivated Briggs's friendship simply because Eric felt Briggs could help him advance in the department.

Eric had been good at toadying up to anyone who could help him learn the arts of politics and ambition. Eric had always been very actorish: he wasn't real—everything was a role, a part, a performance: everything Eric did was done with his audience in mind. If you couldn't be any help to him he could, without a second thought, cut you dead.

He wasn't really handsome. He had a small round head and ordinary features. But he'd always kept himself trim and he'd always

been a natty dresser. And the beard sharpened his face, made it longer, added polish to his appearance. Back on the mainland, she remembered, he'd tended to favor three-piece suits.

Eric's studio was spartan, dominated by a scrubbed-clean workbench under the dormer window's north light. An array of carving tools filled a wooden rack, each tool seated in its proper niche, and there were four tidy wooden bins containing pieces of white bone of graduated sizes. Antique inkwells and jars were arranged beside a tray of paintbrushes and other slender implements. In three glass display cases, each overhung by a museum light, lay examples of Eric's art. One piece, especially striking, was a large ivory cribbage board in the shape of a Polynesian outrigger canoe with intricate black-and-white scenes engraved upon its faceted surfaces.

"That's a sort of frieze," Eric explained. "If you follow those little scenes around the board, they illustrate the whole mythology of the Polynesian emigration that led to the original settlement of Hawaii a thousand years ago. I'm negotiating to sell it to the museum over in Honolulu."

"It must be pretty lucrative, this stuff."

"It can be. Do you know anything about scrimshaw?"

"No," she said, and she didn't particularly care to; but Eric had paid for the bottle and was pouring a drink for her, and she was desperate for company—anyone's, even Eric's—and so she stayed and pretended interest.

"It's a genuine American folk art. It was originated in the early 1800s by the Yankee whalers who came out to the Pacific with endless time on their hands on shipboard. They got into the habit of scrimshanding to pass the time. The early stuff was crude, of course, but pretty quickly some of them started doing quite sophisticated workmanship. They used sail needles to carve the fine lines of the engraving and then they'd trace India ink or lampblack into the carvings for contrast. About the only materials they had were whalebone and whales' teeth, so that's what they carved at first.

"The art became very popular for a while; about a century ago, and there was a period when scrimshanding became a profession in its own right. That was when they ran short of whalebone and teeth and started illustrating elephant ivory and other white bone materials. Then it all went out of fashion. But it's been coming back into favor the past few years. We've got several scrimshanders here now. The main problem today, of course, is the scarcity of ivory."

At intervals Brenda sipped his whiskey and vocalized sounds in-

dicative of her attentiveness to his monologue. Mainly she was thinking morosely of the pointlessness of it all. Was Eric going to ask her to stay the night? If he did, would she accept? In either case, did it matter?

Watching her with bemused eyes, Eric went on. "The Endangered Species laws have made it impossible for us to obtain whalebone or elephant ivory in any quantities any more. It's a real problem."

"You seem to have a fair supply in those bins there."

"Well, some of us have been buying mastodon ivory and other fossilized bones from the Eskimos—they dig for it in the tundra up in Alaska. But that stuff's in short supply, too, and the price has gone through the ceiling."

Eric took her glass and filled it from the bottle, extracting ice cubes from the half-size fridge under the workbench. She rolled the cold glass against her forehead and returned to the wicker chair, balancing herself with care. Eric smiled with the appearance of sympathy and pushed a little box across the bench. It was the size of a matchbox. The lid fit snugly. Etched into its ivory surface was a drawing of a humpback whale.

"Like it?"

"It's lovely." She tried to summon enthusiasm in her voice.

"It's nearly the real thing," he said. "Not real ivory, of course, but real bone at least. We've been experimenting with chemical processes to bleach and harden it."

She studied the tiny box and suddenly looked away. Something about it had put her in mind of little Geoff's casket.

"The bones of most animals are too rough and porous," Eric was saying. "They tend to decompose, of course, being organic. But we've had some success with chemical hardening agents. Still, there aren't many types of bone that are suitable. Of course, there are some people who're willing to make do with vegetable ivory or hard plastics, but those really aren't acceptable if you care about the artistry of the thing. The phony stuff has no grain, and anybody with a good eye can always tell."

She was thinking she really had to pull herself together. You couldn't get by indefinitely on self-pity and the liquid largess of old acquaintances, met by chance, whom you didn't even like. She'd reached a point-of-no-return: the end of this week her room rent would be due again and she had no money to cover it; the time to make up her mind was now, right now, because either she got a job

or she'd end up like that whiskered wino begging for pennies and eating out of refuse bins.

Eric went on prattling about his silly hobby or whatever it was: something about the larger bones of primates—thigh bone, collar-bone. "Young enough to be in good health of course—bone grows uselessly brittle as we get older . . ." But she wasn't really listening; she stood beside the workbench looking out through the dormer window at the dozens of boats in the anchorage, wondering if she could face walking into one of the tourist dives and begging for a job waiting on tables.

The drink had made her unsteady. She returned to the chair, resolving to explore the town first thing in the morning in search of employment. She *had* to snap out of it. It was time to come back to life and perhaps these beautiful islands were the place to do it: the proper setting for the resurrection of a jaded soul.

Eric's voice paused interrogatively and it made her look up. "What? Sorry."

"These two here," Eric said. She looked down at the two etched pendants. He said, "Can you tell the difference?"

"They look pretty much the same to me."

"There, see that? That one, on the left, that's a piece of whale's tooth. This other one's ordinary bone, chemically hardened and bleached to the consistency and color of true ivory. It's got the proper grain, everything."

"Fine." She set the glass down and endeavored to smile pleasantly.

"That's fine, Eric. Thank you so much for the drinks. I'd better go now—" She aimed herself woozily toward the door.

"No need to rush off, is there? Here, have one more and then we'll get a bite to eat. There's a terrific little place back on the inland side of town."

"Thanks, really, but—"

"I won't take no for an answer, duckie. How often do we see each other, after all? Come on—look, I'm sorry, I've been boring you to tears with all this talk about scrimshaw and dead bones, and we haven't said a word yet about the really important things."

"What important things?"

"Well, what are we going to do about you, duckie? You seem to have a crucial problem with your life right now and I think, if you let me, maybe I can help sort it out. Sometimes all it takes is the counsel of a sympathetic old friend, you know."

By then the drink had been poured and she saw no plausible

reason to refuse it. She settled back in the cane chair. Eric's smile was avuncular. "What are friends for, after all? Relax a while, duckie. You know, when I first came out here I felt a lot the way you're feeling. I guess in a way I was lucky not to've been as good a scholar as you and Briggs were. I got through the Ph.D. program by the skin of my teeth but it wasn't enough. I applied for teaching jobs all over the country, you know. Not one nibble."

Then the quick smile flashed behind the neat beard. "I ran away, you see—as far as I could get without a passport. These islands are full of losers like you and me, you know. Scratch any charter-boat skipper in that marina and you'll find a bankrupt or a failed writer who couldn't get his epic novel published."

Then he lifted his glass in a gesture of toast. "But it's possible to find an antidote for our failure, you see. Sometimes it may take a certain ruthlessness, of course—a willingness to suspend the stupid values we were brought up on. So-called civilized principles are the enemies of any true individualist—you have to learn that or you're doomed to be a loser for all time. The kings and robber barons we've honored throughout history—none of them was the kind to let himself be pushed around by the imbecilic bureaucratic whims of college deans or tenure systems.

"Establishments and institutions and laws are designed by winners to keep losers in their place, that's all. You're only free when you learn there's no reason to play the game by their rules. Hell, duckie, the fun of life only comes when you discover how to make your own rules and laugh at the fools around you. Look—consider your own situation. Is there any single living soul right now who truly gives a damn whether you, Brenda Briggs, are alive or dead?"

Put that starkly it made her gape. Eric leaned forward, brandishing his glass as if it were a searchlight aimed at her face. "Well?"

"No. Nobody," she murmured reluctantly.

"There you are, then." He seemed to relax; he leaned back. "There's not a soul you need to please or impress or support, right? If you went right up Front Street here and walked into the Bank of Hawaii and robbed the place of a fortune and got killed making your escape, you'd be hurting no one but yourself. Am I right, duckie?"

"I suppose so."

"Then why not give it a try?"

"Give what a try?"

"Robbing a bank. Kidnaping a rich infant. Hijacking a yacht.



Stealing a million in diamonds. Whatever you feel like, duckie—whatever appeals to you. Why not? What have you got to lose?"

She twisted her mouth into an uneven smile. "You remind me of the sophomoric sophistry we used to spout when we were undergraduates. Existentialism and nihilism galore." She put her glass down. "Well, I guess not, Eric. I don't think I'll start robbing banks just yet."

"And why not?"

"Maybe I'm just not gaited that way."

"Morality? Is that it? What's morality ever done for *you*?"

She steadied herself with a hand against the workbench, set her feet with care, and turned toward the door. "It's a drink too late for morbid philosophical dialectics. Thanks for the booze, though. I'll see you . . ."

"You'd better sit down, duckie. You're a little unsteady there."

"No, I—"

"Sit down." The words came out in a harsher voice. "The door's locked anyway, duckie—you're not going anywhere."

She scowled, befuddled. "What?"

He showed her the key; then he put it away in his pocket. She looked blankly at the door, the keyhole, and—again—his face. It had gone hard; the polite mask was gone. "I wish you'd taken the bait. Around here all they ever talk about is sunsets and surfing and the size of the marlin some fool caught. At least you've got a bigger vocabulary than that. I really wish you'd jumped at it, duckie. It would have made things easier. But you didn't, so that's that."

"What on earth are you talking about?" She stumbled to the door then—and heard Eric's quiet laughter when she tried the knob.

She put her back to the door. Her head swam. "I don't understand . . ."

"It's the ivory, duckie. The best material is fresh human bone. The consistency, the hardness—it takes a fine polish if it's young and healthy enough . . ."

She stared at him and the understanding seeped into her slowly and she said, "That's where the wino went."

"Well, I have to pick and choose, don't I? I mean, I can't very well use people whose absence would be noticed."

She flattened herself against the door. She was beginning to pass out; she tried to fight it but she couldn't; in the distance, fading, she heard Eric say, "You'll make fine bones, duckie. Absolutely first-rate scrimshaw."

Celia Fremlin

## The Coldness of a Thousand Suns

How warm the water still was, after nearly thirty years! Through the shallow pools left by the falling tide her feet slid, white and mysterious in the starlight, like some strange new species of fish. Quiet, too, just the way fish are quiet; scarcely a ripple stirred the stillness of the summer night as she waded softly on, across the dark sands which had once been golden in the noonday heat as her children scampered across them all those years ago, those many years ago.

"Mummy!" they had shrieked, "Mummy, look! Look at my starfish . . . Look at my castle, it's much bigger than Janie's castle, isn't it? . . . Mummy, look, is this a hermit crab? . . . Look at my shell, Mummy, it's all pink inside! Look, Mummy, look!"

Oh, she had been a goddess then: dispenser of buns and knowledge and ginger beer; provider of towels for shivering little bodies; comforter of bruised toes; inventor of enchanted games. She had known then what it was to reign over sea and sand and summer. She had been "Mummy."

Now her fingers tightened round the bottle of pills in the pocket of the thick winter coat she had chosen, summer though it was, to come here and die in. A winter coat, and once she had worn so little and had run across the sands with her squealing children: "I can race you, Mummy! Look, Mummy, look, I can run faster than you can!"

And then the sandwiches and the crisps and the fizzy drinks, and after that the guessing games and the story games as they lay, drunk with sunshine, in the hot sandy hollow mid the marram grass. She remembered how the damp, sandy little bodies pressed up closer: "Another story, Mummy! *Please*, Mummy, just one more!"

And now the voices were silent, her children vanished; grown, long since, into mere people, as surely as if they had died. And she was Mummy no longer, and the glory had gone from her. She was an aging woman, a nuisance to her doctors, who could do no more for her, and to her friends, whose sympathy for her eternal aches and pains was beginning to wear thin.

The pain! Aaaah, it was coming back now—not just the weary gnawing that went on all the time, but a heavy bloated agony that twisted her over double, brought her to a standstill. Oh, God, oh God, no, no! Oh, please! Clutching herself in a half hoop, she saw her white quivering feet, with the water trembling over them—swollen, grotesque, like the intensity of pain itself.

And then the spasm passed, grew weaker, and she straightened up again. Now that it had gone away, she was glad—yes, glad—that the pain had returned, if only for a minute. For it had been strange the way it had ceased completely, for a whole afternoon, once she had decided to make an end to it. Just the way a tooth stops aching the very moment you step into the dentist's waiting room.

It had shaken her resolve, this eerie cessation of pain, after all the unrelenting months of it. The absence had left room for the fear of death to come flooding back, and she had sat in the cheap boardinghouse lounge, her winter coat already on, and had cried with the uncertainty and the fear of it all. And then it was evening, and she didn't go in to dinner; and presently there were her landlady and the woman from the first floor back, asking her what was the matter. "Nothing," she'd said, and had to turn her tear-stained face away and fuss with her handbag. Nothing, nothing at all; she was just going out to post a letter, that's all, before turning in.

Under the pitying, guarded gaze of both of them she had managed to get herself out of the front door; and then, somehow, there was no turning back. On, on, past the last of the dark houses, past the straggling beach huts, past the silent, salty little pleasure boats, upended under the stars. Soon her feet were gliding over the gray glimmering sand left by the falling tide, and she had known that she would never rest now until she had reached the Place.

The Place.

Our Place. The picnic place. The hollow in the sandhills sacred to Us.

Us? There is no such thing now. We are gone, finished. Gone like all the summer noondays of the vanished years. There is no Us now, there is only me, a dreary middle-aged woman, riddled with death, padding through the dark still-warm shallows, dragging herself here, here to Our Place, to die.

Nothing had changed. Even in the darkness of the moonless night she recognized the slope of dry sand and sea thistle that led up to the dunes. Black against the stars, she could see the spiked marram grass, could hear its dry whispering in the night air. Once it had

been astir with insects, with galloping children, under the blazing August sky.

All gone. The sun, the children, the insects of long ago. The dry powdery sand, once so warm to bare brown holiday feet, was cold now, cold like death; and the marram grass, as it stirred and rustled against her calves, was cruel in the darkness, sharp and vicious against her flabby aging skin.

And how cold, cold Our Place had become after thirty years! Bare, like a crater on the moon; and only eight feet wide! The marram grass on the rim bent stiffly to her passing, then raised itself and seemed to watch, grave and hostile, as she slithered and stumbled down to the very heart and center of Our Place.

Once there, she sat down in the darkness—and the coldness of the soft deep sand sent a shudder of foolish dismay along her thighs. Somehow she had not thought that the warmth would be *all* gone, but it was. Our Place knew her no more.

Well, and why should it? Why had she imagined it would still welcome her after all the years? She, who had once brought laughter here and delicious food and happy sunburnt children—now she was bringing to Our Place only death, and her pain-racked body.

She was a pollution, a blasphemy, a sin against the golden days that were gone.

And yet . . . The impulse to die in the place where one has truly lived is strong in all of us. So she stayed sitting there, right in the center of Our Place, just where she had once sat in her glory, dispensing chocolate and ideas for games and bottles of lemonade. Now she took from her coat pocket a bottle of plain water. It gleamed eerily in the starlight, and the water glugged and gurgled as she swallowed it, mouthful by mouthful, with one handful after another of the long blue pills. And when she had finished them all, she lay back on that same soft deep sand where she had once basked and waited for death to come.

She could hear the tide, at its lowest ebb now, murmuring far off in the darkness across the flat sands; and as the pain ebbed slowly, and for the last time, from her tormented body, she could almost imagine she heard her children's voices, far off, playing at the water's edge. And as the night breeze moaned above her she could almost fancy beyond her closed eyelids the hot blue sky blazing.

And this strange drowsy warmth stealing over her, it was like the warmth of the sun. No, of a thousand suns, the suns of all the long-

dead summer days, beating down upon her from far, far away across the years. . .

"Mummy! Mummy! Wake up! We're *starving*! You've been asleep for so *long*!"

Their laughter, their mock reproaches, broke through the strange light feeling in her head. Damp, eager little hands were tugging at her, urging her into a sitting position; shrill voices clamored in her ears.

Dazed, almost incredulous with joy, she shook the sleep from her eyes. What a ghastly dream! Thank goodness the kids' awakened her before it had got any worse! For a few moments she lay still, ignoring their clamor, and gave herself up to the incredible sensation of being *young*! Of having a body that was *well*! The miraculous, unbelievable sensation of health, of organs working exactly as they should, all of them, in magical, effortless harmony.

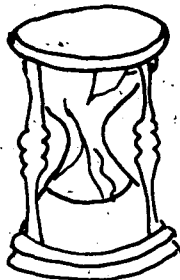
"Mummy! You *said* we could have the picnic straight after our swim! You *promised*! Oh, Mummy, come on!"

And slowly, still dizzy with sun and sleep, and with a stupefying sense of relief, she scrambled to her feet, the dry powdery sand scattering this way and that from her sun-warmed limbs. How marvelous her body felt, so strong, so lithe, and with only the ridiculous barrier of a bikini between it and the glory of the sun!

And now she was standing up; and as she stood there, her littlest child, her berry-brown little four-year-old, ran up, squealing with excitement.

"Look, Mummy!" she cried, "look, everybody! I'm going to go bye-bye in the sand, like Mummy did!" And so saying, she flopped down onto the patch of sand her mother had just vacated, then leaped up, as if she had been stung.

"Mummy! Mummy! It's so *cold* where you've been lying! Mummy, why is it so cold?"



## Broker's Special

It was the first time in a good many years that Cornelius, a Wall Street broker, had made the homeward trip in any train other than the Broker's Special. The Special was his kind of train; the passengers on it were his kind of people. Executives, professionals, men of substance and dignity who could recognize each other without introductions, and understand each other without words.

*If it weren't for the Senator's dinner party*, Cornelius reflected. But the Senator had insisted, so there was no escape from that abomination of abominations, the midweek dinner party. And, of course, no escape from the necessity of taking an earlier train home to the tedium of dressing, and an evening of too much food, too much liquor, and all the resultant misery on the following morning.

Filled with this depressing thought, Cornelius stepped down heavily from the train to the familiar platform and walked over to his car. Since Claire preferred the station wagon, he used the sedan to get to and from the station. When they were first married two years ago, she had wanted to chauffeur him back and forth, but the idea had somehow repelled him. He had always felt there was something vaguely obscene about the way other men publicly kissed their wives goodbye in front of the station every morning, and the thought of being placed in their position filled him with a chilling embarrassment. He had not told this to Claire, however. He had simply told her he had not married her to obtain a housekeeper or chauffeur. She was to enjoy her life, not fill it with unnecessary duties.

Ordinarily, it was no more than a fifteen-minute drive through the countryside to the house. But now, in keeping with the already exasperating tenor of the day's events, he met an unexpected delay. A mile or so past where the road branched off from the highway it crossed the main line of the railroad. There was no guard or crossing gate here, but a red light, and a bell which was ringing an insistent warning as Cornelius drove up. He braked the car, and sat tapping his fingers restlessly on the steering wheel while the endless, clanking length of a freight went by. And then, before he could start the car again, he saw them.

It was Claire and a man. His wife and some man in the station

wagon roaring past him into town. And the man was driving—seated big and blond and arrogant behind the wheel like a Viking—with one arm around Claire, who, with eyes closed, rested her head on his shoulder. There was a look on her face, too, such as Cornelius had never seen there before, but which he had sometimes dreamed of seeing. They passed by in a flash, but the picture they made was burned as brilliant in his mind as a photograph on film.

He would not believe it, he told himself incredulously; he refused to believe it! But the picture was there before him, growing clearer each second, becoming more and more terribly alive as he watched it. The man's arm possessing her. Her look of acceptance. Of sensual acceptance.

He was shaking uncontrollably now, the blood pounding in his head, as he prepared to turn the car and follow them. Then he felt himself go limp. Follow them where? Back to town undoubtedly, where the man would be waiting for the next train to the city. And then what? A denunciation in the grand style? A scene? A public humiliation for himself as much as for them?

He could stand anything, but not such humiliation. It had been bad enough when he had first married Claire and realized his friends were laughing at him for it. A man in his position to marry his secretary, and a girl half his age at that! Now he knew what they had been laughing at, but he had been blind then. There had been such an air of cool formality about her when she carried on her duties in the office; she sat with such prim dignity when she took his notes; she had dressed so modestly—and when he had first invited her to dinner she had reddened with the flustered naiveté of a young girl being invited on her first date. Naiveté! And all the time, he thought furiously, she must have been laughing at me. She, along with the rest of them.

He drove to the house slowly, almost blindly. The house was empty, and he realized that, of course, it was Thursday, the servant's day off, which made it the perfect day for Claire's purpose. He went directly to the library, sat down at the desk, there, and unlocked the top drawer. His gun was in that drawer, a short-barreled .38, and he picked it up slowly, hefting its cold weight in his hand, savoring the sense of power it gave him. Then abruptly his mind went back to something Judge Hilliker had once told him, something strangely interesting that the old man had said while sharing a seat with him on the Broker's Special.

"Guns?" Hilliker had said. "Knives? Blunt instruments? You can

throw-them all out of the window. As far as I'm concerned there is just one perfect weapon—an automobile. Any automobile in good working order. Why? Because when an automobile is going fast enough it will kill anyone it hits. And if the driver gets out and looks sorry he'll find that he's the one getting everybody's sympathy and not that bothersome corpse on the ground who shouldn't have been in the way anyhow. As long as the driver isn't drunk or flagrantly reckless he can kill anybody in this country he wants to, and suffer no more than a momentary embarrassment and a penalty that isn't even worth worrying about.

"Think it over, man," the Judge continued: "to most people the automobile is some sort of god, and if God happens to strike you down it's your hard luck. As for me, when I cross a street I just say a little prayer."

There was more of that in Judge Hilliker's mordant and long-winded style, but Cornelius had no need to remember it. What he needed he now had, and very carefully he put the gun back in the drawer, slid the drawer shut, and locked it.

Claire came in while he still sat brooding at the desk, and he forced himself to regard her with cold objectivity—this radiantly lovely woman who was playing him for a fool, and who now stood wide-eyed in the doorway with an incongruously large bag of groceries clutched to her.

"I saw the car in the garage," she said breathlessly. "I was afraid something was wrong. That you weren't feeling well . . ."

"I feel very well."

"But you're home so early. You've never come this early before."

"I've always managed to refuse invitations to midweek dinner parties before."

"Oh, Lord!" she gasped. "The dinner! It never even entered my mind. I've been so busy all day . . ."

"Yes?" he said. "Doing what?"

"Well, everyone's off today, so I took care of the house from top to bottom, and then when I looked in the pantry and saw we needed some things I ran into town for them." She gestured at the bulky paper bag with her chin. "I'll have your bath ready and your things laid out as soon as I put this stuff away."

Watching her leave, he felt an honest admiration for her. Another woman would have invented a visit to a friend who might, at some later time, accidentally let the cat out of the bag. Or another woman would not have thought to burden herself with a useless package



to justify a trip into town. But not Claire, who was evidently as clever as she was beautiful.

And she *was* damnably attractive. His men friends may have laughed behind his back, but in their homes she was always eagerly surrounded by them. When he entered a roomful of strangers with her he saw how all men's eyes followed her with a frankly covetous interest. No, nothing must happen to her; nothing at all. It was the man who had to be destroyed, just as one would destroy any poacher on his preserves, any lunatic who with axe in hand ran amok through his home. Claire would have to be hurt a little, would have to be taught her lesson; but that would be done most effectively through what happened to the man.

Cornelius learned very quickly that his plans would have to take in a good deal more than the simple act of waylaying the man and running him down. There were details, innumerable details covering every step of the way before and after the event, which had to be jigsawed into place bit by bit in order to make it perfect.

In that respect, Cornelius thought gratefully, the Judge had been far more helpful than he had realized in his irony. Murder by automobile was the perfect murder, because, with certain details taken care of, it was not even murder at all! There was the victim, and there was the murderer standing over him, and the whole thing would be treated with perfunctory indifference. After all, what was one more victim among the thirty thousand each year? He was a statistic, to be regarded with some tongue-clicking and a shrug of helplessness.

Not by Claire, of course. Coincidence can be stretched far, but hardly far enough to cover the case of a husband's running down his wife's lover. And that was the best part of it. Claire would know, but would be helpless to say anything, since saying anything must expose her own wrong-doing. She would spend her life, day after day, knowing that she had been found out, knowing that a just vengeance had been exacted, and standing forewarned against any other such temptations that might come her way.

But what of the remote possibility that she might choose to speak out and expose herself? There, Cornelius reflected, fitting another little piece of the jigsaw into place, coincidence would instantly go to work for him. If there was no single shred of evidence that he had ever suspected her affair, or that he had ever seen the man

before, the accident *must* be regarded by the law as coincidence. Either way, his position was unassailable.

It was with this in mind that he patiently and single-mindedly went to work on his plans. He was tempted at the start to call in some professional investigator who could promptly and efficiently bring him the information he wanted, but after careful consideration he put this idea aside. A smart investigator might easily put two and two together after the accident. If he were honest he might go to the authorities with his suspicions; if he were dishonest he might be tempted to try blackmail. Obviously, there was no way of calling in an outsider without risking one danger or the other. And nothing, nothing at all, was going to be risked here.

So it took Cornelius several precious weeks to glean the information he wanted, and, as he admitted to himself, it might have taken even longer had not Claire and the man maintained such an unfailing routine. Thursday was the one day of the week on which the man would pay his visits. Then, a little before the city-bound train arrived at the station, Claire would drive the station wagon into an almost deserted sidestreet a block from the plaza. In the car, the couple would kiss with an intensity that made Cornelius's flesh crawl.

As soon as the man left the car, Claire would drive swiftly away and the man would walk briskly to the plaza, make his way through the cars parked at the curb there, cross the plaza, obviously sunk in his own thoughts and with only half an eye for passing traffic, and would enter the station. The third time Cornelius witnessed this performance he could have predicted the man's every step with deadly accuracy.

Occasionally, during this period, Claire mentioned that she was going to the city to do some shopping, and Cornelius took advantage of this as well. He was standing in a shadow of the terminal's waiting room when her train pulled in, he followed her at a safe distance to the street, his cab trailed hers almost to the door of the shabby apartment house where the man lived. The man was sitting on the grimy steps of the house, obviously waiting for her. When he led her into the house, as Cornelius bitterly observed, they held hands like a pair of school children, and then there was a long wait, a wait which took up most of the afternoon; but Cornelius gave up waiting before Claire reappeared.

The eruption of fury he knew after that scene gave him the idea of staging the accident there on the city streets the next day, but

Cornelius quickly dismissed the thought. It would mean driving the car into the city, which was something he never did, and that would be a dangerous deviation from his own routine. Besides, city tabloids, unlike his staid local newspaper, sometimes publicized automobile accidents not only by printing the news of them, but also by displaying pictures of victim and culprit on their pages. He wanted none of that. This was a private affair. Strictly private.

No, there was no question that the only place to settle matters was right in the plaza itself, and the more Cornelius reviewed his plans in preparation for the act the more he marveled at how flawless they were.

Nothing could conceivably go wrong. If by some mischance he struck down the man without killing him, his victim would be in the same position as Claire: unable to speak openly without exposing himself. If he missed the man entirely he was hardly in the dangerous position of an assassin who misses his victim and is caught with the gun or knife in his hand. An automobile wasn't a weapon; the affair would simply be another close call for a careless pedestrian.

However, he wanted no close calls, and to that end he took to parking the car somewhat farther from the station than he ordinarily did. The extra distance, he estimated, would allow him to swing the car across the plaza in an arc which would meet the man as he emerged from between the parked cars across the street. That would just about make explanations uncalled for. A man stepping out from between parked cars would be more in violation of the law than the driver who struck him!

Not only did he make sure to set the car at a proper distance from the station entrance, but Cornelius also took to backing it into place as some other drivers did. Now the front wheels were facing the plaza and he could quickly get up all the speed he wanted. More than that, he would be facing the man from the instant he came into sight.

The day before the one he had chosen for the final act, Cornelius waited until he was clear of traffic on his homeward drive and then stopped the car on a deserted part of the road, letting the motor idle. Then he carefully gauged the distance to a tree some thirty yards ahead; this, he estimated, would be the distance across the plaza. He started the car and then drove it as fast as he could past the tree, the big machine snarling as it picked up speed. Once past the tree, he braced himself, stepped hard on the brake, and felt the pressure

of the steering wheel against his chest as the car slewed to a shrieking stop.

That was it. That was all there was to it . . .

He left the office the next day at the exact minute he had set for himself. After his secretary had helped him on with his coat, he turned to her as he had prepared himself to do, and made a wry face.

"Just not feeling right," he said. "Don't know what's wrong with me, Miss Wynant."

And, as he knew good secretaries were trained to do, she frowned worriedly at him and said, "If you didn't work so hard, Mr. Bolinger . . ."

He waved that aside brusquely. "Nothing that getting home early to a good rest won't cure. Oh," he slapped at the pockets of his coat, "my pills, Miss Wynant. They're in the top drawer over there."

They were only a few aspirins in an envelope, but it was the impression that counted. A man who was not feeling well had that much more justification for a mishap while he was driving.

The early train was familiar to him now; he had ridden on it several times during the past few weeks, but always circumspectly hidden behind a newspaper. Now it was to be different. When the conductor came through to check his commutation ticket, Cornelius was sitting limp in his seat, clearly a man in distress.

"Conductor," he asked, "if you don't mind, could you get me some water?"

The conductor glanced at him and hastily departed. When he returned with a dripping cup of water, Cornelius slowly and carefully removed an aspirin from the envelope and washed it down gratefully.

"If there's anything else," the conductor said, "just you let me know."

"No," Cornelius said, "no, I'm a little under the weather, that's all."

But at the station the conductor was there to lend him a solicitous hand down and dally briefly. "You're not a regular, are you?" the conductor said. "At least, not on this train."

Cornelius felt a lift of gratification. "No," he said, "I've only taken this train once before. I usually travel on the Broker's Special."

"Oh." The conductor looked him up and down and grinned. "Well, that figures," he said. "Hope you found our service as good as the Special's."

In the small station, Cornelius sat down on a bench, his head

resting against the back of the bench, his eyes on the clock over the ticket agent's window. Once or twice he saw the agent glance worriedly through the window at him, and that was fine. What was not so fine was the rising feeling in him, a lurching nervousness in his stomach, a too-heavy thudding of his heart in his chest. He had allowed himself ten minutes here; each minute found the feeling getting more and more oppressive. It was an effort to contain himself; to prevent himself from getting to his feet and rushing out to the car before the minute hand of the clock had touched the small black spot that was his signal.

Then, on the second, he got up, surprised at the effort it required to do this, and slowly walked out of the station, the agent's eyes following him all the way, and down past the station to the car. He climbed behind the wheel, closed the door firmly after him, and started the motor. The soft purring of the motor under his feet sent a new strength up through him. He sat there soaking it up, his eyes fixed on the distance across the plaza.

When the man first appeared, moving with rapid strides toward him, it struck Cornelius in some strange way that the tall, blond figure was like a puppet being drawn by an invisible wire to his destined place on the stage. Then, as he came closer, it was plain to see that he was smiling broadly, singing aloud in his exuberance of youth and strength—and triumph. That was the key which unlocked all paralysis, which sent the motor roaring into furious life.

For all the times he had lived the scene in his mind's eye, Cornelius was unprepared for the speed with which it happened. There was the man stepping out from between the cars, still blind to everything. There was Cornelius's hand on the horn, the ultimate inspiration, a warning that could not possibly be heeded, and more than anything else an insurance of success. The man swung toward the noise, his face all horror, his hands outthrust as if to fend off what was happening. There was the high-pitched scream abruptly cut off by the shock of impact, more violent than Cornelius had ever dreamed, and then everything dissolving into the screech of brakes.

The plaza had been deserted before it had happened; now, people were running from all directions and Cornelius had to push his way through them to catch a glimpse of the body.

"Better not look," someone warned, but he did look, and saw the crumpled form, the legs scissored into an unnatural position, the face graying as he watched. He swayed, and a dozen helping hands reached out to support him, but it was not weakness which affected

him now, but an overwhelming, giddy sense of victory, a sense of victory heightened by the voices around him.

*"Walked right into it with his eyes wide open."*

*"I could hear that horn a block away."*

*"Drunk, maybe. The way he stood right there . . ."*

The only danger now lay in overplaying his hand. He had to watch out for that, had to keep fitting piece after piece of the plan together, and then there would be no danger. He sat in the car while a policeman questioned him with official gravity, and he knew from the growing sympathy in the policeman's voice that he was making the right impression.

No, he was free to go home if he wished. Charges, of course, had to be automatically preferred against him, but the way things looked . . . Yes, they would be glad to phone Mrs. Bolinger. They could drive him home, but if he preferred to have her do it . . .

He had allowed time enough for her to be at home when the call was made, and he spent the next fifteen minutes with the crowd staring at him through the car window with a morbid and sympathetic curiosity. When the station wagon drew up nearby, a lane magically appeared through the crowd; when Claire was at his side the lane disappeared.

Even frightened and bewildered, she was a beautiful woman, Cornelius thought, and, he had to admit to himself, she knew how to put on a sterling show of wifely concern and devotion, false as it was. But perhaps that was because she didn't know yet, and it was time for her to know.

He waited until she had helped him into the station wagon, and when she sat down in the driver's seat he put an arm tight around her.

"Oh, by the way, officer," he asked with grave anxiety through the open window. "Did you find out who the man was? Did he have any identification on him?"

The policeman nodded. "Young fellow from the city," he said, "so we'll have to check up on him down there. Name of Lundgren. Robert Lundgren, if his card means anything."

Against his arm Cornelius felt rather than heard the choked gasp, felt the uncontrollable small shivering. Her face was as gray as that of the man's out there in the street. "All right, Claire," he said softly. "Let's go home."

She drove by instinct out through the streets of the town. Her face was vacuous, her eyes set and staring. He was almost grateful when

they reached the highway and she finally spoke in a quiet and wondering voice. "You knew," she said. "You knew about it, and you killed him for it."

"Yes," Cornelius said, "I knew about it."

"Then you're crazy," she said dispassionately, her eyes still fixed ahead of her. "You must be crazy to kill someone like that."

Her even, informative tone fired his anger as much as what she was saying.

"It was justice," he said between his teeth. "It was coming to him."

She was still remote. "You don't understand."

"Don't understand what?"

She turned toward him and he saw that her eyes were glistening wet. "I knew him before I ever knew you, before I ever started working in the office. We always went together; it didn't seem as if there was any point living if we couldn't be together." She paused only a fraction of a second.

"But things didn't go right. He had big ideas that didn't make any money, and I couldn't stand that. I was born poor and I couldn't stand marrying poor and dying poor . . . That's why I married you. And I tried to be a good wife—you'll never know how hard I tried!—but that wasn't what you wanted. You wanted a showpiece, not a wife; something to parade around in front of people so that they could admire you for owning it, just like they admire you for everything else you own."

"You're talking like a fool," he said harshly. "And watch the road. We turn off here."

"Listen to me!" she said. "I was going to tell you all about it. I was going to ask for a divorce. Not a penny to go with it, or anything like that—just the divorce so that I could marry him and make up for all the time I had thrown away! That's what I told him today, and if you had only asked—only talked to me—"

She would get over it, he thought. It had been even more serious than he had realized, but, as the saying went, *all passes*. She had nothing to trade her marriage for any longer; when she understood that clearly, they would make a new start. It was a miracle that he had thought of using the weapon he had, and that he had used it so effectively. *A perfect weapon*, the Judge had said. He'd never know how perfect.

It was the warning clangor of the bell at the grade crossing that jarred Cornelius from his reverie—that, and the alarming realization that the car's speed was not slackening at all. Then everything

else was submerged by the angry bawling of a Diesel horn, and when he looked up incredulously it was at the raging mountain of steel that was the Broker's Special hurling itself over the crossing directly ahead.

"Watch out!" he cried out wildly. "My God, what are you doing!"

In that last split second, when her foot went down hard on the accelerator, he knew.





# Charles Dickens

## Hunted Down

The partition which separated my own office from our general outer office in the City was of thick plate-glass. I could see through it what passed in the outer office, without hearing a word. I had it put up in place of a wall that had been there for years—ever since the house was built. It is no matter whether I did or did not make the change in order that I might derive my first impression of strangers, who came to us on business, from their faces alone, without being influenced by anything they said. Enough to mention that I turned my glass partition to that account, and that a Life Assurance Office is at all times exposed to be practiced upon by the most crafty and cruel of the human race.

It was through my glass partition that I first saw the gentleman whose story I am going to tell.

He had come in without my observing it, and had put his hat and umbrella on the broad counter, and was bending over it to take some papers from one of the clerks. He was about forty or so, dark, exceedingly well dressed in black—being in mourning—and the hand he extended with a polite air had a particularly well fitting black-kid glove upon it. His hair, which was elaborately brushed and oiled, was parted straight up the middle and he presented this parting to the clerk, exactly (to my thinking) as if he had said, in so many words: "You must take me, if you please, my friend, just as I show myself. Come straight up here, follow the gravel path, keep off the grass, I allow no trespassing."

I conceived a very great aversion to that man the moment I thus saw him.

He had asked for some of our printed forms, and the clerk was giving them to him and explaining them. An obliged and agreeable smile was on his face and his eyes met those of the clerk with a sprightly look. (I have known a vast quantity of nonsense talked about bad men not looking you in the face. Don't trust that conventional idea. Dishonesty will stare honesty out of countenance any day in the week if there is anything to be got by it.)

I saw, in the corner of his eyelash, that he became aware of my

looking at him. Immediately he turned the parting in his hair toward the glass partition, as if he said to me with a sweet smile, "Straight up here, if you please. Off the grass!"

In a few moments he had put on his hat and taken up his umbrella and was gone.

I beckoned the clerk into my room and asked, "Who was that?"

He had the gentleman's card in his hand. "Mr. Julius Slinkton, Middle Temple."

"A barrister, Mr. Adams?"

"I think not, sir."

"I should have thought him a clergyman but for his having no Reverend here," said I.

"Probably, from his appearance," Mr. Adams replied, "he is reading for orders."

I should mention that he wore a dainty white cravat, and dainty linen altogether.

"What did he want, Mr. Adams?"

"Merely a form of proposal, sir, and form of reference."

"Was he recommended here? Did he say?"

"Yes, he said he was recommended here by a friend of yours. He noticed you, but said that as he had not the pleasure of your personal acquaintance he would not trouble you."

"Did he know my name?"

"Oh, yes, sir! He said, 'There is Mr. Sampson, I see!'"

"A well spoken gentleman, apparently?"

"Remarkably so, sir."

"Insinuating manners, apparently?"

"Very much so, indeed, sir."

"Hah!" said I. "I want nothing at present, Mr. Adams."

Within a fortnight of that day I went to dine with a friend of mine, a merchant, a man of taste, who buys pictures and books, and the first man I saw among the company was Mr. Julius Slinkton. There he was, standing before the fire, with good large eyes and an open expression of face, but still (I thought) requiring everybody to come at him by the prepared way he offered and by no other.

I noticed him ask my friend to introduce him to Mr. Sampson, and my friend did so. Mr. Slinkton was very happy to see me. Not too happy; there was no overdoing of the matter; happy in a thoroughly well bred, perfectly unmeaning way.

"I thought you had met," our host observed.

"No," said Mr. Slinkton. "I did look in at Mr. Sampson's office on your recommendation, but I really did not feel justified in troubling Mr. Sampson himself on a point in the everyday routine of a clerk."

I said I should have been glad to show him any attention on our friend's introduction.

"I am sure of that," said he, "and am much obliged. At another time, perhaps, I may be less delicate. Only, however, if I have real business; for I know, Mr. Sampson, how precious business time is and what a vast number of impertinent people there are in the world."

I acknowledged his consideration with a slight bow. "You were thinking," said I, "of effecting a policy on your life."

"Oh, dear, no! I am afraid I am not so prudent as you pay me the compliment of supposing me to be, Mr. Sampson. I merely inquired for a friend. But you know what friends are in such matters. Nothing may ever come of it. I have the greatest reluctance to trouble men of business with inquiries for friends, knowing the probabilities to be a thousand to one that the friends will follow them up. People are so fickle, so selfish, so inconsiderate. Don't you, in your business, find them so every day?"

I was going to give a qualified answer, but he turned his smooth, white parting on me with its "Straight up here, if you please!" and I answered, "Yes."

"I hear, Mr. Sampson," he resumed presently, for our friend had a new cook and dinner was not so punctual as usual, "that your profession has recently suffered a great loss."

"In money?" said I.

"No, in talent and vigor."

Not at once following out his allusion, I considered for a moment. "Has it sustained a loss of that kind?" said I. "I was not aware of it."

"Understand me, Mr. Sampson. I don't imagine that you have retired. It is not so bad as that. But Mr. Meltham—"

"Oh, to be sure!" said I. "Yes! Mr. Meltham, the young actuary of the 'Inestimable.'"

"Just so," he returned in a consoling way.

"He is a great loss. He was at once the most profound, the most original, and the most energetic man I have ever known connected with Life Assurance."

I spoke strongly, for I had a high esteem and admiration for Meltham, and my gentleman had indefinitely conveyed to me some suspicion that he wanted to sneer at him. He recalled me to my

guard by presenting that trim pathway up his head, with its infernal "Not on the grass, if you please—the gravel."

"You know him, Mr. Slinkton?"

"Only by reputation. To have known him as an acquaintance or as a friend is an honor I should have sought if he had remained in society, though I might never have had the good fortune to attain it, being a man of far inferior mark. He was scarcely above thirty, I suppose?"

"About thirty."

"Ah!" he sighed in his former consoling way. "What creatures we are! To break up, Mr. Sampson, and become incapable of business at that time of life!—Any reason assigned for the melancholy fact?"

(Humph! thought I, as I looked at him. But I *won't* go up the track, and I *will* go on the grass.)

"What reason have you heard assigned, Mr. Slinkton?" I asked, point-blank.

"Most likely a false one. You know what rumor is, Mr. Sampson. I never repeat what I hear; it is the only way of paring the nails and shaving the head of rumor. But when *you* ask me what reason I have heard assigned for Mr. Meltham's passing away from among men, it is another thing. I am not gratifying idle gossip then. I was told, Mr. Sampson, that Mr. Meltham had relinquished all his avocations and all his prospects because he was, in fact, broken-hearted. A disappointed attachment, I heard—though it hardly seems probable in the case of a man so distinguished and so attractive."

"Attractions and distinctions are no armor against death," said I.

"Oh, she died? Pray pardon me. I did not hear that. That, indeed, makes it very, very sad. Poor Mr. Meltham! Ah, dear me! Lamentable, lamentable!"

I still thought his pity was not quite genuine, and I still suspected an unaccountable sneer under all this, until he said, as we were parted by the announcement of dinner: "Mr. Sampson, you are surprised to see me so moved on behalf of a man whom I have never known. I am not so disinterested as you may suppose. I have suffered—and recently, too—from death myself. I have lost one of two charming nieces who were my constant companions. She died young—barely three-and-twenty—and even her remaining sister is far from strong. The world is a grave!"

He said this with deep feeling, and I felt reproached for the cold-

ness of my manner. Coldness and distrust had been engendered in me, I knew, by my bad experiences; they were not natural to me, and I often thought how much I had lost in life, losing trustfulness, and how little I had gained in gaining hard caution.

This state of mind being habitual to me, I troubled myself more about this conversation than I might have troubled myself about a greater matter. I listened to his talk at dinner and observed how readily other men responded to it, and with what a graceful instinct he adapted his subjects to the knowledge and habits of those he talked with. As in talking with me he had easily started the subject I might be supposed to understand best, and to be the most interested in, so in talking with others he guided himself by the same rule. The company was of a varied character, but he was not at fault that I could discover with any member of it. He knew just as much of each man's pursuit as made him agreeable to that man in reference to it, and just as little as made it natural in him to seek modestly for information when the theme was broached.

As he talked and talked—but really not too much, for the rest of us seemed to force it upon him—I became quite angry with myself. I took his face to pieces in my mind, like a watch, and examined it in detail. I could not say much against any of his features separately; I could say even less against them when they were put together. Then is it not monstrous, I asked myself, that because a man happens to part his hair straight up the middle of his head, I should permit myself to suspect, and even to detest him?

(I may stop to remark that this was no proof of my sense. An observer of men who finds himself steadily repelled by some apparently trifling thing in a stranger is right to give it great weight. It may be the clue to the whole mystery. A hair or two will show where a lion is hidden. A very little key will open a very heavy door.)

I took my part in the conversation with him after a time, and we got on remarkably well. In the drawing room I asked the host how long he had known Mr. Slinkton. He answered, not many months; he had met him at the house of a celebrated painter then present, who had known him well when he was traveling with his nieces in Italy for their health. His plans in life being broken by the death of one of them, he was reading with the intention of going back to college as a matter of form, taking his degree, and going into orders. I could not but argue with myself that here was the true explanation of his interest in poor Meltham, and that I had been almost brutal in my distrust on that simple head . . .

On the very next day but one I was sitting behind my glass partition as before when he came into the outer office, as before. The moment I saw him again without hearing him, I hated him worse than ever.

It was only for a moment that I had this opportunity, for he waved his tight-fitting black glove the instant I looked at him and came straight in.

"Mr. Sampson, good day! I presume, you see, upon your kind permission to intrude upon you. I don't keep my word in being justified by business, for my business here—if I may so abuse the word—is of the slightest nature."

I asked was it anything I could assist him in.

"I thank you, no. I merely called to inquire outside whether my dilatory friend had been so false to himself as to be practical and sensible. But, of course, he has done nothing. I gave him your papers with my own hand, and he was hot upon the intention, but of course he has done nothing. Apart from the general human disinclination to do anything that ought to be done, I daresay there is a specialty about assuring one's life. You find it like will-making. People are so superstitious and take it for granted they will die soon afterwards."

"Up here, if you please; straight up here, Mr. Sampson. Neither to the right nor to the left." I almost fancied I could hear him breathe the words as he sat smiling at me, with that intolerable parting exactly opposite the bridge of my nose.

"There is such a feeling sometimes, no doubt," I replied, "but I don't think it obtains to any great extent."

"Well," said he, with a shrug and a smile, "I wish some good angel would influence my friend in the right direction. I rashly promised his mother and sister in Norfolk to see it done, and he promised them that he would do it. But I suppose he never will."

He spoke for a minute or two on indifferent topics and went away.

I had scarcely unlocked the drawers of my writing-table next morning, when he reappeared. I noticed that he came straight to the door in the glass partition this time and did not pause a single moment outside.

"Can you spare me two minutes, my dear Mr. Sampson?"

"By all means."

"Much obliged," laying his hat and umbrella on the table; "I came

early, not to interrupt you. The fact is, I am taken by surprise in reference to this proposal my friend has made."

"Has he made one?" said I.

"Ye-es," he answered, deliberately looking at me; and then a bright idea seemed to strike him—"or he only tells me he has. Perhaps that may be a new way of evading the matter. By Jupiter, I never thought of that!"

Mr. Adams was opening the morning's letters in the outer office. "What is the name, Mr. Slinkton?" I asked.

"Beckwith."

I looked out at the door and requested Mr. Adams, if there were a proposal in that name, to bring it in. He had already laid it out of his hand on the counter. It was easily selected from the rest and he gave it me. Alfred Beckwith. Proposal to effect a policy with us for two thousand pounds. Dated yesterday.

"From the Middle Temple, I see, Mr. Slinkton."

"Yes. He lives on the same staircase with me; his door is opposite. I never thought he would make me his reference, though."

"It seems natural enough that he should."

"Quite so, Mr. Sampson; but I never thought of it. Let me see." He took the printed paper from his pocket. "How am I to answer all these questions?"

"According to the truth, of course," said I.

"Oh, of course!" he answered, looking up from the paper with a smile; "I meant they were so many. But you do right to be particular. It stands to reason that you must be particular. Will you allow me to use your pen and ink?"

"Certainly."

"And your desk?"

"Certainly."

He had been hovering about between his hat and his umbrella for a place to write on. He now sat down in my chair, at my blotting-paper and inkstand, with the long walk up his head in accurate perspective before me, as I stood with my back to the fire.

Before answering each question he ran over it aloud and discussed it. How long had he known Mr. Alfred Beckwith? That he had to calculate by years upon his fingers. What were his habits? No difficulty about them; temperate in the last degree, and took a little too much exercise, if anything. All the answers were satisfactory. When he had written them all, he looked them over and finally signed them in a very pretty hand. He supposed he had now done

with the business. I told him he was not likely to be troubled any further. Should he leave the papers there? If he pleased. Much obliged. Good morning.

I had had one other visitor before him; not at the office, but at my own house. That visitor had come to my bedside when it was not yet daylight and had been seen by no one else but my faithful confidential servant.

A second reference paper (for we required always two) was sent down into Norfolk and was duly received back by post. This, likewise, was satisfactorily answered in every respect. Our forms were all complied with; we accepted the proposal, and the premium for one year was paid.

For six or seven months I saw no more of Mr. Slinkton. He called once at my house, but I was not at home; and he once asked me to dine with him in the Temple, but I was engaged. His friend's assurance was effected in March. Late in September or early in October I was down at Scarborough for a breath of sea air, where I met him on the beach. It was a hot evening; he came toward me with his hat in his hand; and there was the walk I had felt so strongly disinclined to take in perfect order again, exactly in front of the bridge of my nose.

He was not alone, but had a young lady on his arm.

She was dressed in mourning, and I looked at her with great interest. She had the appearance of being extremely delicate and her face was remarkably pale and melancholy, but she was very pretty. He introduced her as his niece, Miss Niner.

"Are you strolling, Mr. Sampson? Is it possible you can be idle?"

It *was* possible, and I *was* strolling.

"Shall we stroll together?"

"With pleasure."

The young lady walked between us, and we walked on the cool sea sand in the direction of Filey.

"There have been wheels here," said Mr. Slinkton. "And now I look again, the wheels of a hand-carriage! Margaret, my love, your shadow without doubt!"

"Miss Niner's shadow?" I repeated, looking down at it on the sand.

"Not that one," Mr. Slinkton returned, laughing. "Margaret, my dear, tell Mr. Sampson."

"Indeed," said the young lady, turning to me, "there is nothing to tell—except that I constantly see the same invalid old gentleman



at all times, wherever I go. I have mentioned it to my uncle, and he calls the gentleman my shadow."

"Does he live in Scarborough?" I asked.

"He is staying here."

"Do you live in Scarborough?"

"No, I am staying here. My uncle has placed me with a family here, for my health."

"And your shadow?" said I, smiling.

"My shadow," she answered, smiling, too, "is—like myself—not very robust, I fear; for I lose my shadow sometimes, as my shadow loses me at other times. We both seem liable to confinement to the house. I have not seen my shadow for days and days; but it does oddly happen, occasionally, that wherever I go, for many days together, this gentleman goes. We have come together in the most unfrequented nooks on this shore."

"Is this he?" said I, pointing before us.

The wheels had swept down to the water's edge, and described a great loop on the sand in turning. Bringing the loop back toward us, and spinning it out as it came, was a hand-carriage drawn by a man.

"Yes," said Miss Niner, "this really is my shadow, uncle."

As the carriage approached us and we approached the carriage, I saw within it an old man, whose head was sunk on his breast and who was enveloped in a variety of wrappers. He was drawn by a very quiet but very keen-looking man with iron-grey hair, who was slightly lame. They had passed us, when the carriage stopped and the old gentleman within, putting out his arm, called to me by my name. I went back, and was absent from Mr. Slinkton and his niece for about five minutes.

When I rejoined them, Mr. Slinkton was the first to speak. Indeed, he said to me in a raised voice before I came up with him:

"It is well you have not been longer or my niece might have died of curiosity to know who her shadow is, Mr. Sampson."

"An old East India Director," said I. "An intimate friend of our friend's, at whose house I first had the pleasure of meeting you. A certain Major Banks. You have heard of him?"

"Never."

"Very rich, Miss Niner; but very old, and very crippled. An amiable man, sensible—much interested in you. He has just been expatiating on the affection that he has observed to exist between you and your uncle."

Mr. Slinkton was holding his hat again, and he passed his hand up the straight walk, as if he himself went up it serenely, after me.

"Mr. Sampson," he said, tenderly pressing his niece's arm in his, "our affection was always a strong one, for we have had but few near ties. We have still fewer now. We have associations to bring us together that are not of this world, Margaret."

"Dear uncle!" murmured the young lady, and turned her face aside to hide her tears.

"My niece and I have such remembrances and regrets in common, Mr. Sampson," he feelingly pursued, "that it would be strange indeed if the relations between us were cold or indifferent. If I remember a conversation we once had together, you will understand the reference I make. Cheer up, dear Margaret. Don't droop, don't droop. My Margaret! I cannot bear to see you droop!"

The poor young lady was very much affected, but controlled herself. His feelings, too, were very acute. In a word, he found himself under such great need of a restorative that he presently went away to take a bath of sea water, leaving the young lady and me sitting by a point of rock, and probably presuming—but that you will say was a pardonable indulgence in a luxury—that she would praise him with all her heart.

She did, poor thing! With all her confiding heart, she praised him to me, for his care of her dead sister, and for his untiring devotion in her last illness. The sister had wasted away very slowly, and wild and terrible fantasies had come over her toward the end, but he had never been impatient with her, or at a loss; had always been gentle, watchful, and self-possessed. The sister had known him, as she had known him, to be the best of men, the kindest of men, and yet a man of such admirable strength of character as to be a very tower for the support of their weak natures while their poor lives endured.

"I shall leave him, Mr. Sampson, very soon," said the young lady; "I know my life is drawing to an end, and when I am gone I hope he will marry and be happy. I am sure he has lived single so long only for my sake, and for my poor, poor sister's."

The little hand-carriage had made another great loop on the damp sand and was coming back again, gradually spinning out a slim figure of eight half a mile long.

"Young lady," said I, looking around, laying my hand upon her arm, and speaking in a low voice, "time presses. You hear the gentle murmur of that sea?"

She looked at me with the utmost wonder and alarm, saying,

"Yes!"

"And you know what a voice is in it when the storm comes?"

"Yes!"

"You see how quiet and peaceful it lies before us, and you know what an awful sight of power without pity it might be this very night!"

"Yes!"

"But if you had never heard or seen it, or heard of it in its cruelty, could you believe that it beats every inanimate thing in its way to pieces without mercy, and destroys life without remorse?"

"You terrify me, sir, by these questions!"

"To save you, young lady, to save you! For God's sake, collect your strength and collect your firmness! If you were here alone, and hemmed in by the rising tide on the flow to fifty feet above your head, you could not be in greater danger than the danger you are now to be saved from."

The figure on the sand was spun out, and straggled off into a crooked little jerk that ended at the cliff very near us.

"As I am, before Heaven and the Judge of all mankind, your friend, and your dead sister's friend, I solemnly entreat you, Miss Niner, without one moment's loss of time, to come to this gentleman with me!"

If the little carriage had been less near to us, I doubt if I could have got her away, but it was so near that we were there before she had recovered the hurry of being urged from the rock. I did not remain there with her two minutes. Certainly within five, I had the inexpressible satisfaction of seeing her—from the point we had sat on, and to which I had returned—half supported and half carried up some rude steps notched in the cliff, by the figure of an active man. With that figure beside her, I knew she was safe anywhere.

I sat alone on the rock, awaiting Mr. Slinkton's return. The twilight was deepening and the shadows were heavy when he came round the point, with his hat hanging at his button-hole, smoothing his wet hair with one of his hands and picking out the old path with the other and a pocket-comb.

"My niece not here, Mr. Sampson?" he said, looking about.

"Miss Niner seemed to feel a chill in the air after the sun was down, and has gone home."

He looked surprised, as though she were not accustomed to do anything without him.

"I persuaded Miss Niner," I explained.

"Ah!" said he. "She is easily persuaded—for her good. Thank you, Mr. Sampson; she is better within doors. The bathing-place was farther than I thought, to say the truth."

"Miss Niner is very delicate," I observed.

He shook his head and drew a deep sigh. "Very, very, very. You may recollect my saying so. The time that has since intervened has not strengthened her. The gloomy shadow that fell upon her sister so early in life seems, in my anxious eyes, to gather over her, ever darker, ever darker. Dear Margaret, dear Margaret! But we must hope."

The hand-carriage was spinning away before us at a most indecorous pace for an invalid vehicle and was making most irregular curves upon the sand. Mr. Slinkton, noticing it, said:

"If I may judge from appearances, your friend will be upset, Mr. Sampson."

"It looks probable, certainly," said I.

"The servant must be drunk."

"The servants of old gentlemen will get drunk sometimes," said I.

"The major draws very light, Mr. Sampson."

"The major does draw light," said I.

By this time the carriage, much to my relief, was lost in the darkness. We walked on for a little, side by side over the sand, in silence. After a short while he said, in a voice still affected by the emotion that his niece's state of health had awakened in him.

"Do you stay here long, Mr. Sampson?"

"Why, no. I am going away tonight."

"So soon? But business always holds you in request. Men like Mr. Sampson are too important to others to be spared to their own need of relaxation and enjoyment."

"I don't know about that," said I. "However, I am going back. To London."

"I shall be there, too, soon after you."

I knew that as well as he did. But I did not tell him so. Any more than I told him what defensive weapon my right hand rested on in my pocket as I walked by his side. Any more than I told him why I did not walk on the sea side of him with the night closing in.

We left the beach, and our ways diverged. We exchanged good night, and had parted indeed, when he said, returning,

"Mr. Sampson, *may* I ask? Poor Meltham, whom we spoke of—dead yet?"

"Not when I last heard of him; but too broken a man to live long, and hopelessly lost to his old calling."

"Dear, dear, dear!" said he, with great feeling. "Sad, sad, sad! The world is a grave!" And so went his way.

It was not his fault if the world were not a grave, but I did not call that observation after him, any more than I had mentioned those other things just now enumerated. He went his way, and I went mine with all expedition. This happened, as I have said, either at the end of September or beginning of October. The next time I saw him, and the last, was late in November.

I had a very particular engagement to breakfast in the Temple. It was a bitter northeasterly morning and the sleet and slush lay inches deep in the streets. I could get no conveyance and was soon wet to the knees, but I should have been true to that appointment, though I had to wade to it up to my neck in the same impediments.

The appointment took me to some chambers in the Temple. They were at the top of a lonely corner house overlooking the river. The name, MR. ALFRED BECKWITH, was painted on the outer door. On the door opposite, on the same landing, the name MR. JULIUS SLINKTON. The doors of both sets of chambers stood open, so that anything said aloud in one set could be heard in the other.

I had never been in those chambers before. They were dismal, close, unwholesome, and oppressive; the furniture, originally good, and not yet old, was faded and dirty—the rooms were in great disorder; there was a strong prevailing smell of opium, brandy, and tobacco; the grate and fire-irons were splashed all over with unsightly blotches of rust; and on a sofa by the fire, in the room where breakfast had been prepared, lay the host, Mr. Beckwith, a man with all the appearances of the worst kind of drunkard, very far advanced upon his shameful way to death.

"Slinkton is not come yet," said this creature, staggering up when I went in; "I'll call him—Halloa! Julius Caesar! Come and drink!" As he hoarsely roared this out, he beat the poker and tongs together in a mad way, as if that were his usual manner of summoning his associate.

The voice of Mr. Slinkton was heard through the clatter from the opposite side of the staircase, and he came in. He had not expected the pleasure of meeting me. I have seen several artful men brought

to a stand, but I never saw a man so aghast as he was when his eyes rested on mine.

"Julius Caesar," cried Beckwith, staggering between us, "Mist' Sampson! Mist' Sampson, Julius Caesar! Julius, Mist' Sampson, is the friend of my soul. Julius keeps me plied with liquor, morning, noon, and night. Julius is a real benefactor. Julius threw the tea and coffee out of the window when I used to have any. Julius empties all the water-jugs of their contents and fills 'em with spirits. Julius winds me up and keeps me going—boil the brandy, Julius!"

There was a rusty and furred saucepan in the ashes—the ashes looked like the accumulation of weeks—and Beckwith, rolling and staggering between us as if he were going to plunge headlong into the fire, got the saucepan out and tried to force it into Slinkton's hand.

"Boil the brandy, Julius Caesar! Come! Do your usual office. Boil the brandy!"

He became so fierce in his gesticulations with the saucepan that I expected to see him lay open Slinkton's head with it. I therefore put out my hand to check him. He reeled back to the sofa and sat there panting, shaking, and red-eyed, in his rags of dressing-gown, looking at us both. I noticed then that there was nothing to drink on the table but brandy, and nothing to eat but salted herrings, and a hot, sickly, highly peppered stew.

"At all events, Mr. Sampson," said Slinkton, offering me the smooth gravel path for the last time, "I thank you for interfering between me and this unfortunate man's violence. However you came here, Mr. Sampson, or with whatever motive you came here, at least I thank you for that."

Without gratifying his desire to know how I came there, I said, quietly, "How is your niece, Mr. Slinkton?"

He looked hard at me, and I looked hard at him.

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Sampson, that my niece has proved treacherous and ungrateful to her best friend. She left me without a word of notice or explanation. She was misled, no doubt, by some designing rascal. Perhaps you may have heard of it."

"I did hear that she was misled by a designing rascal. In fact, I have proof of it."

"Are you sure of that?" said he.

"Quite."

"Boil the brandy," muttered Beckwith. "Company to breakfast,

Julius Caesar. Do your usual office—provide the usual breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper. Boil the brandy!”

The eyes of Slinkton looked from him to me and he said, after a moment’s consideration, “Mr. Sampson, you are a man of the world, and so am I. I will be plain with you.”

“And I tell you you will not,” said I. “I know all about you. *You* plain with anyone? Nonsense, nonsense!”

“I plainly tell you, Mr. Sampson,” he went on, with a manner almost composed, “that I understand your object. You want to save your funds, and escape from your liabilities; these are old tricks of trade with you Office-gentlemen. But you will not do it, sir; you will not succeed. You have not an easy adversary to play against when you play against me. We shall have to inquire, in due time, when and how Mr. Beckwith fell into his present habits. With that remark, sir, I put this poor creature, and his incoherent wanderings of speech, aside and wish you a good morning and a better case next time.”

While he was saying this, Beckwith had filled a half-pint glass with brandy. At this moment, he threw the brandy at his face, and threw the glass after it. Slinkton put his hands up, half blinded with the spirit, and cut with the glass across the forehead. At the sound of the breakage, a fourth person came into the room, closed the door, and stood at it; he was a very quiet but very keen-looking man, with iron-grey hair, and slightly lame.

Slinkton pulled out his handkerchief, assuaged the pain in his smarting eyes, and dabbed the blood on his forehead. He was a long time about it, and I saw that in the doing of it a tremendous change came over him, occasioned by the change in Beckwith—who ceased to pant and tremble, sat upright, and never took his eyes off him. I never in my life saw a face in which abhorrence and determination were so forcibly painted as in Beckwith’s then.

“Look at me, you villain,” said Beckwith, “and see me as I really am. I took these rooms to make them a trap for you. I came into them as a drunkard, to bait the trap for you. You fell into the trap and you will never leave it alive. On the morning when you last went to Mr. Sampson’s office, I had seen him first. Your plot has been known to both of us all along, and you have been counter-plotted all along. What? Having been cajoled into putting that prize of two thousand pounds in your power, I was to be done to death with brandy, and, brandy not proving quick enough, with something quicker? Have I never seen you, when you thought my senses gone, pouring from your little bottle into my glass? Why, you Murderer

and Forger, alone here with you in the dead of night, as I have so often been, I have had my hand upon the trigger of a pistol, twenty times, to blow your brains out!"

This sudden starting up of the thing he had supposed to be his imbecile victim into a determined man, with a settled resolution to hunt him down and be the death of him, mercilessly expressed from head to foot, was, in the first shock, too much for him. Without any figure of speech, he staggered under it. But there is no greater mistake than to suppose that a man who is a calculating criminal is, in any phase of his guilt, otherwise than true to himself, and perfectly consistent with his whole character. Such a man commits murder, and murder is the natural culmination of his course; such a man has to outface murder, and will do it with hardihood and effrontery. It is a sort of fashion to express surprise that any notorious criminal, having such crime upon his conscience, can so brave it out. Do you think that if he had it on his conscience at all, or had a conscience to have it upon, he would ever have committed the crime?

Perfectly consistent with himself, as I believe all such monsters to be, this Slinkton recovered himself and showed a defiance that was sufficiently cold and quiet. He was white, he was haggard, he was changed; but only as a sharper who had played for a great stake and had been outwitted.

"Listen to me, you villain," said Beckwith, "and let every word you hear me say be a stab in your wicked heart. When I took these rooms, to throw myself in your way and lead you on to the scheme that I knew my appearance and supposed character and habits would suggest to such a devil, how did I know that? Because you were no stranger to me. I knew you well. And I knew you to be the cruel wretch who, for so much money, had killed one innocent girl while she trusted him implicitly, and who was by inches killing another."

Slinkton took out a snuff-box, took a pinch of snuff, and laughed.

"But see here," said Beckwith, never looking away, never raising his voice, never relaxing his face, never unclenching his hand. "See what a dull wolf you have been, after all! The infatuated drunkard who never drank a fiftieth part of the liquor you plied him with, but poured it away, here, there, everywhere—almost before your eyes; who brought over the fellow you set to watch him and to ply him, by outbidding you in his bribe, before he had been at his work three days—with whom you have observed no caution, yet who was so bent on ridding the earth of you as a wild beast that he should have



defeated you if you had been ever so prudent—that drunkard whom you have, many a time, left on the floor of this room, and who has even let you go out of it, alive and undeceived, when you have turned him over with your foot—has, almost as often, on the same night, within an hour, within a few minutes, watched you awake, had his hand at your pillow when you were asleep, turned over your papers, taken samples from your bottles and packets of powder, changed their contents, rifled every secret of your life!”

He had had another pinch of snuff in his hand, but had gradually let it drop from between his fingers to the floor, where he now smoothed it out with his foot, looking down at it the while.

“That drunkard,” said Beckwith, “who had free access to your rooms at all times, that he might drink the strong drinks that you left in his way and be the sooner ended, holding no more terms with you than he would hold with a tiger, has had his master-key for all your locks, his test for all your poisons, his clue to your cipher-writing. He can tell you, as well as you can tell him, how long it took to complete that deed, what doses there were, what intervals, what signs of gradual decay upon mind and body; what distempered fancies were produced, what observable changes, what physical pain. He can tell you, as well as you can tell him, that all this was recorded day by day, as a lesson of experience for future service. He can tell you, better than you can tell him, where that journal is now.”

Slinkton stopped the action of his foot, and looked at Beckwith.

“No,” said the latter, as if answering a question from him. “Not in the drawer of the writing-desk that opens with a spring; it is not there, and it never will be there again.”

“Then you are a thief!” said Slinkton.

Without any change whatever in the inflexible purpose, which it was quite terrific even to me to contemplate, and from the power of which I had always felt convinced it was impossible for this wretch to escape, Beckwith returned,

“I am your niece’s shadow, too.”

With an imprecation, Slinkton put his hand to his head, tore out some hair, and flung it to the ground. It was the end of the smooth walk; he destroyed it in the action, and it will soon be seen that his use for it was past.

Beckwith went on: “Whenever you left here, I left here. Although I understood that you found it necessary to pause in the completion of that purpose, to avert suspicion, still I watched you close, with the poor confiding girl. When I had the diary, and could read it word

by word—it was only about the night before your last visit to Scarborough—you remember the night? you slept with a small flat vial tied to your wrist—I sent to Mr. Sampson, who was kept out of view. This is Mr. Sampson's trusty servant standing by the door. We three saved your niece among us."

Slinkton looked at us all, took an uncertain step or two from the place where he had stood, returned to it, and glanced about him in a very curious way—as one of the meaner reptiles might, looking for a hole to hide in. I noticed at the same time that a singular change took place in the figure of the man—as if it collapsed within his clothes, and they consequently became ill-shapen and ill-fitting.

"You shall know," said Beckwith, "for I hope the knowledge will be bitter and terrible to you, why you have been pursued by one man, and why, when the whole interest that Mr. Sampson represents would have expended any money in hunting you down, you have been tracked to death at a single individual's charge. I hear you have had the name of Meltham on your lips sometimes?"

I saw, in addition to those other changes, a sudden stoppage come upon his breathing.

"When you sent the sweet girl whom you murdered (you know with what artfully made-out surroundings and probabilities you sent her) to Meltham's office, before taking her abroad to originate the transaction—that doomed her to the grave, it fell to Meltham's lot to see her and to speak with her. It did not fall to his lot to save her, though I know he would freely give his own life to have done it. He admired her—I would say he loved her deeply if I thought it possible that you could understand the word. When she was sacrificed, he was thoroughly assured of your guilt. Having lost her, he had but one object left in life, and that was to avenge her and destroy you.

"That man Meltham," Beckwith steadily pursued, "was as absolutely certain that you could never elude him in this world if he devoted himself to your destruction with his utmost fidelity and earnestness, and if he divided the sacred duty with no other duty in life, as he was certain that in achieving it he would be a poor instrument in the hands of Providence, and would do well before Heaven in striking you out from among living men. I am that man, and I thank God I have done my work!"

If Slinkton had been running for his life from swift-footed savages a dozen miles, he could not have shown more emphatic signs of being oppressed at heart and laboring for breath than he showed now when he looked at the pursuer who had so relentlessly hunted him down.

"You never saw me under my right name before; you see me under my right name now. You shall see me once again in the body, when you are tried for your life. You shall see me once again in the spirit, when the cord is round your neck and the crowd are crying against you!"

When Meltham had spoken these last words, the miscreant suddenly turned away his face and seemed to strike his mouth with his open hand. At the same instant, the room was filled with a new and powerful odor, and, almost at the same instant he broke into a crooked run, leap, start—I have no name for the spasm—and fell, with a dull weight that shook the heavy old doors and windows.

That was the fitting end of him.

When we saw that he was dead, we drew away from the room, and Meltham, giving me his hand, said wearily, "I have no more work on earth, my friend. But I shall see her again elsewhere."

It was in vain that I tried to rally him. He might have saved her, he said; he had not saved her, and he reproached himself; he had lost her, and he was broken-hearted.

"The purpose that sustained me is over, Sampson, and there is nothing now to hold me to life. I am not fit for life; I am weak and spiritless; I have no hope and no object."

In truth, I could hardly have believed that the broken man who then spoke to me was the man who had so strongly and so differently impressed me when his purpose was before him. I used such entreaties with him as I could, but he still said, and always said, in a patient, undemonstrative way—nothing could avail him—he was broken-hearted.

He died early in the next spring. He was buried by the side of the poor young lady for whom he had cherished those tender and unhappy regrets; and he left all he had to her sister. She lived to be a happy wife and mother; she married my sister's son, who succeeded poor Meltham; she is living now, and her children ride about the garden on my walking-stick when I go to see her.



Dana Lyon

## The Bitter Years

The woman finished cleaning up the sink from her solitary meal—the chicken breast cooked in wine, the crisp avocado salad, the beaten biscuits that she had made herself, with enough left over to heat for breakfast—and now the little house was in perfect order. The sun, in this rustic mountain village that she had selected for her permanent home, would sink quickly behind the wooded hills, so that there was never a long protracted period of dusk, and now there would be only a few moments left before everything was shrouded in darkness. So she must take her final look of the day at the ground made ready for her new lawn and garden.

Tomorrow, the man Samuel had said; tomorrow the soil will be ready for the seed and then, God willing, you may have a decent lawn for a change. He was proud of his preparations; no one yet had been able to grow a satisfactory lawn in this rocky section of the hills. Many had tried and had succeeded in growing a few scraggly blades. But she was determined to achieve a beautiful lushness out there in back, and then she would buy some awnings and outdoor furniture and perhaps put in a little fountain; and when she got back from her trip she could sit outdoors all summer long and just bask in the beauty and quiet brought to life through her own efforts. During the winters she would travel: Mexico, South America, the Mediterranean; but in the summers she would enjoy the home and lawn and garden for which she had waited so long.

Still glancing out the window she saw a whisk of white leaping onto the dark loam of the readied earth. She was instantly alert, flying out the back door, screaming "Nemo! Nemo!" to her little cat, which paid not the slightest attention because it had sunk to its belly in the soft damp soil. Unthinking, realizing only that the cat might sink all the way in, as in quicksand, she stepped into the dirt and found herself plunged into it almost to her knees, before her feet came to rest on the rocky hardness of the ground underneath.

"Damn!" she said to herself, and laughed. "Old fool that I am."

She pulled herself out of the foot-and-a-half depth of the loam, rescued the yowling cat, and plodded back into the house, there to strip and shower.

Oddly enough, she was pleased at the depth of the new soil. The man Samuel had done his work well—had obviously roto-tilled the rocky ground as well as he could and had then hauled in great loads of top soil, weed free and fertilized, now lying ready in the sun for tomorrow's fine grass seed. He hadn't cheated. He hadn't, as some garden workers might have done, merely put in a thin layer of dirt over the solid foundation, but had really prepared the grass for a lifetime of growth. (But he had still shaken his head, had still grumbled in the pessimistic manner of these mountainfolk who were too used to disappointment to tempt fate by hoping. "Grass seed just don't want to grow up here," he had muttered while he raked and smoothed, smoothed and raked. "Soil's empty. Air's too thin. Winter's too fierce." But he had kept on raking and smoothing, promising disaster but hoping in spite of himself.)

The woman smiled to herself, wiped herself dry from the shower, got into her nightdress and lounging robe, washed the cat, much to its enagement (for who, it seemed to be saying, can wash a cat better than itself?), and went to her easy chair in front of the television set.

She was alone. And safe. Safe at last. Happy and comfortable. Rested. Rested for the first time in her life and with that wonderful world cruise waiting for her, after her years of vacationless labor. Only a few weeks ahead now, but time for her to see the new young grass begin to come up and to know that it would be full-fledged on her return months from now. She had never been as content, excited as a young girl, as she was now. The bitter years behind, the exciting years ahead.

She grew weary and exasperated with the television, for in this mountain fastness there were only two stations available and on one there was a rock group, splitting the air with the modern sounds of yelling and shouting, and on the other an old Western, making loud noises, too, but those of the past, shooting and shouting and galloping hither and yon.

She turned off the set and went to her desk drawer, pushing aside the small revolver she kept there because she was living alone, and took out a pile of brightly colored brochures, to look through again, dreaming and visualizing, living in the future, ignoring the past: the magnificent ship where she would have an outside cabin all to herself and could have days and nights of quiet leisure; England with its magnificent history; the continent, Paris, Venice, everywhere—even Crete—a cruise to last nearly a whole year. Above all,

it was to be the first vacation of any kind in so many years that she couldn't even count them.

She gloated over the pictures, the colorful, impossible descriptions, and once again, as she had a dozen times before, took out the voluminous ticket, the directions, the receipt, the date of sailing, the pamphlets suggesting what kind of clothes to bring with her—all of it, everything, that had once been her impossible dream. Everything was now arranged for: Samuel to cut and water the new lawn and care for Nemo; the post office to hold her mail (what mail?); Mr. Prescott, the one-man police department, to check her house periodically.

Everything in order, everything waiting. And finally—pure joy—there would be the trip down the mountain in the rickety old daily bus, the air flight to the city, the overnight stay in one of the big hotels, and then the taxi ride the next morning to the great white ship and all that it promised.

At first she did not hear the knock on the door. The house was quiet, the only sound that of Nemo purring at her feet; but she was lost in another world and the sound of the first knock did not penetrate.

It came again, and this time she heard it. Still lost, not even wondering who would be knocking after dusk had fallen, she went to the door and opened it, and saw a small man standing there.

"Yes?" she said, surprised but not yet apprehensive.

"Miss Kendrick?"

Prepared, yet not prepared, she held herself in the vise of total physical discipline. She did not flinch, nor did any expression appear on her face.

"No," she said quietly. "You must have the wrong place."

"I think not," said the man. He was wholly nondescript; five feet six or seven, thinning sandy hair, suit the same color, pale-blue eyes.

"My name is Stella Nordway," she said. "*Mrs.* Stella Nordway."

"Oh?" he said, smiling. "You've been married recently?"

"I have been a widow for ten years," she told him. "So you see, you are mistaken."

"May I come in?"

"No," and she started to close the door.

His face altered slightly. A flicker of fury, then almost instantly a mask of mediocrity that could totally obliterate him in a crowd.

"I am an investigator," he said, "for the Halmut Bonding Company. They have employed me to find a woman named Norma Kendrick who embezzled more than \$100,000 from her employers over the last seven years. They want you, Miss Kendrick. *And the money.*"

She said, "You may come in," and opened the door a little wider. He slipped through, instantly found the most uncomfortable chair in the room, short and straight-backed, and sat on the edge of it—as if taking his ease on the sofa might have lulled him into a lack of alertness.

"You are mistaken," she said again, almost helplessly. "I am not—"

"I am a trained investigator," he said. "For the last twenty-three years. This much I know: you worked for the Sharpe Wholesale Hardware Company, as its head bookkeeper. A large and prosperous establishment. You were competent and reliable. There was only one peculiarity about you: during the last seven years you refused to take the three weeks' vacation you were entitled to every year—"

"But I—" she broke in, then bit the words back. He had deployed her into a near admission. "But," she corrected herself quickly, "I have nothing to do with all this, so you see—"

"You are Norma Kendrick," he said. "I can't help admitting that I am rather curious as to what made you suddenly turn into an embezzler. For years you had been taking care of your invalid father and doing your daily stint at the office, coming home to the same routine every night. Then suddenly you decided to help yourself to the company's money. At the end of the first year you realized you couldn't leave your books—they would have been an open admission to the substitute bookkeeper they'd have to assign in your absence. I was appalled that Mr. Sharpe had not been more curious as to why you wouldn't take your vacation each year, but he said he had trusted you completely, since you were the daughter of an old friend and had shown your competence and reliability; and moreover, you had explained your lack of vacations by saying you couldn't leave your father in order to go anywhere, and that you were desperately in need of extra money for your father's medical bills, so if Mr. Sharpe would just pay you what he would have paid your substitute, in addition to your regular salary, you would appreciate it."

The woman sat frozen, afraid to speak, afraid not to. Instead she listened. There had to be a loophole somewhere. "So?" she prodded him, and he looked surprised, perhaps because he had expected another denial from her.

"So instead of a vacation you would frequently take a long weekend, say from Thursday to Monday, or Friday to Tuesday, and during these periods you managed to set up your second identity as Stella Nordway. You wore a blonde wig, tinted glasses, more youthful clothes, and you bought this house. You also bought a single ticket for a world cruise. You did these things rather hurriedly, after seven years of dipping into the till, because not only had your father finally died, but the hardware company was about to be sold because the owner was ready to retire. This sale, of course, would entail a careful scrutiny of the books. Well, Miss Kendrick?"

Her mind fluttered.

"Are the police after me?" she said, in a final relinquishment to the inevitable.

He smiled. "Well, no. Not yet. As I said earlier, I work for the bonding company first, your employer second, and, of course, as soon as you are located, then the law will step in. The police are also looking for you, but in a different direction. The bonding company will get their money—what's left of it—and the state will get its revenge. Your little house will go—"

He glanced around the neat attractive room and out the window at the dark sky where the stars shone clearly and cleanly in the mountain air. He sighed with pleasure. It would be a lovely retreat for him after too much of a lifetime spent in the city. "Your trip around the world—and how I envied you that—will have to go—"

She was becoming confused. Why weren't the police here? Why hadn't he notified Mr. Prescott, the one-man police force, that this town was harboring a fugitive? Why was this person here, just telling her these things and doing nothing about it? She knew she had lost her gamble, but she had known it was a gamble from the beginning. The bitterness was gall.

The little man spoke again, half smiling.

"Mrs. Nordway—" he began.

"Mrs. Nordway?" she echoed. "But you—you insist that I am Norma Kendrick—"

"You can be either one you please," he told her quietly. "It's up to you."

She sank into the nearest chair, completely confused by now, her confusion greater than her terror. "What do you mean?" she stammered.

"Well, just this. You see, you have more courage than I have. More ingenuity. More gambling spirit. I have been tied to a sickly wife



for too many years, just as you were tied to your father, and the more I looked after her, the worse her temper grew. She hated being dependent on me. There was no way I could earn enough money for escape. I am what I am. I have saved my company many thousands of dollars, perhaps millions, but my salary remains unimpressive . . . So what is your freedom worth, Mrs. Nordway?—or should I say Miss Kendrick? Whatever is left of the money you stole?”

She sat in an icy cocoon.

Not fear this time, but rage. She could understand the need for the law to make her pay—that was the consequence of losing her gamble; but to be robbed of everything she had hoped for and worked for and risked her freedom for by this oily inconsequential little opportunist sitting there so smugly—that was beyond acceptance.

She stood up.

“There is not much money left,” she said, careful to keep her voice noncommittal, “after buying the house and my cruise ticket. I would be left destitute.”

“I’ll take the house off your hands,” he said, lightly, now that he was winning, “and you can return your cruise ticket. Or, better still, let *me* have it—”

“I don’t believe it’s transferable,” she said, almost absently. “Wait just a minute, I have it right here—” In moving toward her desk she paused for a moment in front of the window, looking out. “How did you get here?” she asked in the same absent voice. “I don’t see your car outside.”

“I left it down the street a ways,” he said, “in front of the church. Under the circumstances it didn’t seem like a good idea to let anyone know you’d had a visitor.”

“I see,” she said, and moved on to her desk, where she rummaged around for a moment, picked up what she wanted, and held it close to the folds of her lounging robe. She remembered, for only an instant, that there were neighbors not too far away, so she moved quietly, unobtrusively, over to the television set.

“Do you like Westerns, Mr.—?”

“Jordan,” he said automatically. “Why, I—” His voice sounded bewildered. Television? Now?

She turned on the volume control, high, and the crashing sound of cowboys still whooping it up with gun and horse filled the room. She lifted the small gun she was holding and, as he stared at her in his brief final moment of comprehension, she pointed it at him and shot him between the eyes . . .

There was noplacé to hide the body. The problem was as simple as that. No cellar in this tiny house; the ground too hard and rocky for digging; no car, for she had never learned to drive—noplacé at all to hide this neat little corpse with the small round hole in the center of its forehead.

She sat. She did not regret her action, knowing that even if she had realized ahead of time the complications in concealing her act, she would have shot him just the same. Rage had impelled her—not greed, not fear, not impulse—just an outraged need to kill this person, this thing, who was going to destroy her entire life and future for his own grasping ends.

She left him there on the living-room rug where he had quietly toppled from his chair—there was little blood—and moved into the kitchen, staring out the back window at her cherished little garden, at the prepared soil for the new lawn in which she had such high hopes. She was numb with grief at the thought of all her bright plans for the future now seemingly destroyed. Disintegrated. Dead as the little man in the other room.

She stared out through the window at the black night, motionless.

The lawn. The soil. Eighteen inches of black pulverized dirt above rocky hardness. A foot and a half. Deeper really than it actually needed to be. Deep enough? For a little man stretched out flat? With grass seed planted over him and growing into solid sod?

The dirt was very soft and slightly damp. She waited by the window in the dark, so that the neighbors would think she had gone to bed, watching the few scattered lights go out, one by one. This was a town for early sleep and early rising, and she must wait no longer than she had to.

At last the night was black and still. Still as death. She went into her back yard and dug up a space in the soft prepared soil the right size for the little man—though of course only eighteen inches deep—being very careful that the spade made no sound against the harder earth. Her eyes were accustomed by now to the gloom whose only light was cast by the pale stars, and her movements were as silent as the night.

She brought the little man out to the back yard and laid him in his grave, arms decorously against his sides, and started to cover him with earth. She paused. He must lie flat, as flat as possible, for Samuel might want to rake and roll the dirt once more and there must be no chance of his tools going deep enough to strike something

solid. It seemed to her that the little man's shoulders were bunched together the way she had him placed; he must lie flatter, flatter.

The grave she had dug was wide but not deep, more space on either side of him than just above him. She tried again, stretching his arms out wide, at right angles to his body—ah, this was better, this was as flat as he would go. Now she could cover him and forget him. Soon, soon, the grass would flourish above him, entangle itself in its own roots, cover him forever, his identity, his total being now lost in other places. But not here.

Not here.

She went back into the house and slept. Her future was again safe.

It was not until some time later that she knew her plans were meaningless. Day by day she watched her rear lawn and waited with anticipation for the first green blades to rise, almost forgetting what lay beneath them. And the grass did come up. But not very well. It was as Samuel had said, she thought in despair; no lawn would grow decently in these mountains of rocks and barren soil and bitter winters. But the blades did come up, struggling to reach the sun, a patch here, a patch there, so that perhaps there might be some hope after all.

One morning, after a night of soft summer rain, she looked out at her lawn and saw that there was a change; for in the center of it now was a great stand of lush green grass, beautiful and thick and bright, and it was in the form of a cross, growing and flourishing amidst the meager struggles of a few pale blades, growing and flourishing, burgeoning in the soft gentle breezes and the warm healing sun. Growing and flourishing.

So that is why the people of the little town wonder about the crazy old woman who mows her foolish struggling lawn twice a week, every week. Not since the first blades came up did she ever leave her house; not once was she ever away from home, even for a brief vacation; not once in the long years that followed did she ever miss the appointed time, rain or shine, spring or fall, when she must cut her lawn.

"Q"

## Gerald Tomlinson

### Another Wandering Daughter Job

Melva Dominic was a daughter of Manhattan, of the Depression, and of the man known as Charlie Corkscrew, a squat, serious hunk with shoulders like the U.S. Sub-Treasury Building. Charlie picked up his nickname when once, early in his speakeasy days, having left his basic weaponry at home, he settled a barroom brawl in Murray Hall with a corkscrew. Fatally.

Charlie's more refined persuasive techniques involved the use of a Thompson submachine gun. He became so adept at chopping down moving targets from a careening LaSalle that the Boss of All Bosses smiled on him. Charlie smiled back. Foolishly.

One night early in Herbert Hoover's reign, following a noisy, four-corpse fracas in front of Angie's Rainbow Gardens on Lexington Avenue, the speeding LaSalle threw a rod while crossing the Queensboro Bridge on its way to the mob's hideout in Jackson Heights. In the back seat of the car police found Charlie clutching a velvet-lined cello case that did not contain a cello. The interior of the case was very warm; so was the Tommy gun.

The jury glowered, its twelve members unbought, and Charlie gnashed his teeth at the verdict. His pregnant wife Bootsie wailed, vowed a deep and abiding love for her caged turtledove, and shortly thereafter moved in with a curly-headed capo across the Hudson.

Despite Charlie's pleas, no one in the mob sped north to talk turkey to the governor. Charlie fretted and fumed. The state fed him and fried him. Ashes to ashes.

Little Melva, heiress to these woes, was born on Black Thursday, 1929, just four days before Charlie walked the last mile at Sing Sing, a date that Melva's mother afterward called Sizzling Monday. Wryly.

It was small wonder that Melva Dominic, a deceptively demure-looking brunette with wide innocent eyes, strayed from the path of the righteous. Too soon adrift, with a mother who, on the curly-headed capo's death from .38-caliber puncture wounds in Deal, New Jersey, lived at the Hotel Dixie and went by the stage name of

Cosmic Raye, Melva soon knew everything worth knowing, and some things not worth knowing, about Times Square and West 52nd Street.

At the age of fourteen Melva whistled the Dixie goodbye. Her mother, ever ready for a party, threw a champagne bash for Melva on her departure, the affair ending in a grand finale with Mama, Cosmic Raye, née Bootsie, dancing the hootchie-cootchie on a marble-topped coffee table at the guttural request of Frankie Brown-Eyes Slade.

Melva, on her own, soon took up residence with Private Jethro Henry. USMC, AWOL, a gawky recent emigre from Parris Island, who supported the two of them in a certain raffish style in a Greenwich Village walkup, using a pair of loaded dice backed up by a pair of brass knuckles.

It appears that Melva truly loved Jethro, for when the United States Marines tracked their young private to his Bleeker Street lair, she joined Jethro in a mad flight to Tijuana, Mexico. For a few weeks Melva entertained her fellow gringos by appearing onstage in scanty attire at the mob-owned Maximilian Club.

Jethro had fallen ill the first day in Mexico after eating a meal of chicken *mole*, and, unaware of Melva's stage triumphs, succumbed in less than a month to a violent case of Montezuma's Revenge.

Back in the States, Melva drifted from town to town: Newport, Kentucky; Gretna, Louisiana; Cicero, Illinois; Phenix City, Alabama. She never wanted for male companionship in these out-of-the-way places. Fresh-faced, doll-like, she attracted admirers the way a Lady Beaverkill lure attracts trout.

And then in 1962 she dropped entirely out of sight.

Which is why, some years later, a Wall Street lawyer for Mrs. John Morland Olmsted made the trek to my agency's fourth-floor office on 47th Street, west of Broadway. I'm a private investigator, the man who runs the World-Wide Detective Agency, or so say the black letters on my frosted-glass door. The agency consists of yours truly Matt Coleridge, 48, and a twenty-nine-year-old secretary who thinks she loves me.

The widow Olmsted's mouthpiece was one of those starchy, bloodless, snowy-haired gentlemen whose taste in booze runs to sherry and whose preference in broads runs from nonexistent to bizarre. He had a nervous little laugh that punctuated his sentences like fizzled firecrackers.

"Mrs. Olmsted is a very wealthy woman," he said by way of introduction.

"Prunes."

The lawyer started, momentarily taken aback. Then he caught my meaning. "You're quite right, Mr. Coleridge. Prunes, grapes, and avocados. Mrs. Olmsted's late husband, John Morland Olmsted, owned a controlling interest in the Intercontinental Fruit Company. Upon his death, Bootsie—Mrs. Olmsted, that is—became sole heir. She is now in her early seventies, in failing health, and she wishes to leave the bulk of her estate to a missing daughter. A woman named Melva. Melva Dominic."

I hauled a fifth of bourbon from the bottom drawer of my scarred metal desk. "Drink?"

"Thank you, no."

I poured a water glass half full of Kentucky's pride, leaned back against my swivel chair, and put away a jigger or two. "Another wandering daughter job, eh?"

"I beg your pardon."

"This Melva," I said. "She didn't like living on Sutton Place? She worked up a social conscience going to Miss Porter's School? She thought John and Bootsie were kingpins in the international capitalist conspiracy?"

"No," the lawyer said thoughtfully. "Nothing like that. Melva ran away more than thirty years ago. Back then Bootsie was called Cosmic Raye, lived at the Hotel Dixie, and sent her daughter to P.S. 191. In those days Bootsie performed every night except Monday as an ecdyasiast at the Cosmos Club on West 52nd Street."

"A stripper."

"If you prefer."

"She's come up in the world."

"She will leave a sizable fortune to her daughter Melva, if Melva can be found. The bequest is somewhere in the neighborhood of eighty million dollars."

"That's a very classy neighborhood. Not many grifters living there. Where was Melva last seen?"

The lawyer built a pyramid with his parchment-white hands. "She was last seen on a street near her apartment in North Las Vegas. Fifteen years ago."

He went on to tell me the life stories of Charlie Corkscrew Dominic and Bootsie Foote Dominic Olmsted. He gave me a couple of dogeared photos of Melva at fourteen. He agreed to a nip of bourbon when I

showed him, first, the label and next, a clean sparkling shotglass. Then he tottered out, leaving Melva's snubbed-out trail to me.

I tried all the usual sources—departments of motor vehicles, municipal tax collectors, boards of elections, Julius Blumberg's outfit, Infosearch, Fidelifacts, even the Ouija board I keep in the top drawer of my rusted file cabinet.

Nothing.

In March 1962 Melva Dominic, a thirty-two-year-old blackjack dealer and sometime showgirl at The Fortinbras Hotel in Las Vegas, had vanished completely. Like a gonfalon bubble, as the poet would say.

After checking out the allowable expenses with Bootsie Olmsted's lawyer, I hopped a night flight to Vegas.

Three days later, bleary-eyed from bird-dogging, blackjack, and booze, I dragged my tired remains to McCarran Airport and slept soundly through a daytime flight to New York. I had acquired a \$3,000 debt, which I was pretty sure Mrs. Olmsted would refuse to pay. I had learned nothing new about Melva Dominic beyond the fact that she once lived in Apartment 2-C of the Sloan Arms in North Las Vegas.

On my second day in the Vegas sunshine I got myself a second shadow, also known as a tail.

He was a tall lean guy with a pockmarked face, gunfighter-blue eyes, and a handlebar mustache. He wore a glittering cowboy shirt open at the neck to reveal a chestful of yellow hair.

He was about as smooth as Bowery bar whiskey when it came to tailing me, but he was persistent. He followed me right onto the DC-10 to Kennedy.

I've never liked being tailed. It reminds me too much of my own daily routine.

When I don't like something, I let people know.

At Kennedy I made my move. I cornered my newfound friend in an otherwise empty men's room, wedged him back between a sink and an air blower, and dug the barrel of my concealed Beretta into his navel. "What gives?" said Harry Handlebars with a charming show of teeth, as if he hardly cared.

"You tell me."

"What's to tell?"

"You've been two steps behind me since I left Caesar's Palace yesterday. Why?"

He winked. "Why not? You're a likable guy."

I rammed the Beretta deeper into his abdomen. "Talk."

"Sure, Coleridge. Anything you say. I could recite a poem. How about 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'?"

"No poems, Harry. Just a straight story. What're you doing on my tail?"

He shrugged. "Mr. Eff says I follow you, I follow you."

Mr. Eff was a man I'd heard about. He was a favorite of Meyer Lansky and Moe Dalitz. Mr. Eff's well manicured hooks had scratched their way into every operation on the Strip since Bugsy Siegel, Las Vegas visionary, flagged down four slugs at his girl friend's pal in Beverly Hills in 1947.

"Why does Mr. Eff want you to follow me?"

"He's looking for his little Melva."

"Melva?"

"Haven't you heard, Coleridge? You're supposed to be looking for a well stacked dame, about five-foot-two, named Melva Dominic. Mr. Eff, he's got the same idea."

I turned that over in my mind. "Why?"

"Mr. Eff gives orders, Coleridge. He barks orders. You ever heard him? He sounds a lot like a wolfhound. Looks like one, too. He don't confide in me or nobody else."

"So?"

"So all I know is you're a New York gumshoe named Coleridge. You're looking for Melva Dominic. Mr. Eff is looking for Melva Dominic. I'm glued to your shirt-tail in case you find her."

"Simple as that."

Harry Handlebars stared past my shoulder. "You learn fast. Hey, there's a big bimbo behind you wants to dry his hands."

It was an old trick, but I fell for it. I turned. And there he was, sure enough, a big bimbo behind me who wanted to dry his hands. The bimbo started to apologize.

"Can it," I muttered. It was as much his men's room as mine, I figured. I sidestepped the big fellow's Florsheims and left.

My secretary had opened the office at ten sharp that morning, the way she always does. She's an early riser, also a faithful sidekick. I can be in Port Chester or Port-au-Prince, but when the big hand is on the twelve and the little hand is on the ten, Sara's hand is on the doorknob.

Sara came to me two years ago after working a while for a dentist



on Park Avenue. Although she's not exactly a showstopper in looks, with freckles, a turned-up nose, bobbed hair, and a face that's a bit too round, she's no mirror-breaker either. She appealed to the dentist enough to attract his amorous attention.

This aging D.D.S. paid Sara Park Avenue wages, a lot higher than mine, but after a few weeks of having him insist on certain after-hours' activities of a nondental nature, she complained. She's not that kind of girl. But the dentist chuckled and kept on insisting. She gave up complaining, kneed him once when he charged, tromped hard on his foot, and chucked the job.

"Morning, Sara," I said, entering the gray confines of World-Wide's fly-specked office. It was a few minutes before noon. I stopped at her desk, caressed her arm and in my fatherly way, quoted a line from Swinburne, and blew the dust from the top of her Underwood. "Any calls?"

She gave me that little-girl beam of hers, all feigned naivete, and her freckles danced. "Melva Dominic phoned a few minutes ago. She said she'll phone again at three."

"Melva Dominic?"

"Not Little Red Riding Hood," Sara said sweetly. "And you got some mail this morning. Two letters, both special delivery. One from Melva Dominic in Boston. The other from Melva Dominic in Thatcher, Arizona. The envelope from Boston is doused in Chanel Number 19."

"The vultures are flying," I said. "I wonder how they got the scent of carrion?"

Sara tapped a copy of the *Evening Standard* lying on her desk. The paper was two days old.

"Martha Talis, the syndicated columnist, that's how." Sara pointed to the column. "She must have found out about your search and put two and two together. Or else that creaky lawyer who was in here spilled it to her. Anyway, half the country knows about the missing Melva Dominic and how she stands to inherit all those buckets of ducats."

"Private eye goes public," I growled, heading for my glassed-in cubicle.

I got halfway there.

The office door opened and in walked a dream. She was tall and slim and cool and elegant, with upswept black hair and gray eyes flecked with gold. Her outfit had the look of Lord & Taylor and her walk had the grace of a Monacan princess.

She glanced at me as if I might have an outside shot at being her footman if I'd agree to shave once a day and give up the horses and the hooch.

Sara, good secretary that she was, kept her head on straight and asked this shining vision its name.

"Melva Dominic," came the melodic reply. "From Roselle Park, New Jersey. I'm looking for a gentleman who calls himself Matt Coleridge."

"I'm Coleridge," I said. "From Hunger, out of Bensonhurst. Let's float into my private office." I motioned toward the gap in the frosted-glass wall.

She swung her fashionable hips past me, lowered herself into a straightback chair, extracted a mile-long cigarette from a gold case, put it in her face, and set fire to it. She blew a fan of smoke into the charged air, watched the smoke plume toward a cluster of cobwebs on the ceiling.

My swivel chair creaked as I lifted a handy bottle of spirits from the bottom drawer. "Drink?"

"A Morning Glory Fizz, please. Light on the absinthe."

I grunted something in Anglo-Saxon and poured out two nips of bourbon neat.

"Now, Miss Dominic," I said in what I thought was a businesslike tone, "let's be honest with each other. I'm Matt Coleridge, as my shingle says. I can prove it. You're Melva Dominic, so you say. I'm pretty sure you can't prove it."

With solemn deliberation she dipped into her Gucci handbag and fished out a bundle of plastic cards, official-looking papers, and glossy photos. She handed them to me.

I bent studiously over this batch of undistilled proof. Melva feathered smoke through her nostrils.

After five minutes I broke the silence. "It's inspiring what a good forger can do," I gave my opinion. "Especially when he's teamed up with a top photographer and a first-class con artist. This assortment of junk you're carrying is practically perfect. If I didn't know better, I'd swear on a stack of Maltese Falcons that you really *are* Melva Dominic."

"Would you like to see me dance?" she asked seductively, crossing her legs and showing a lot of thigh. "The way I used to at the Maximilian Club in Tijuana?"

"You bet I would," I said. I never lie when I'm asked a question like that. "But it won't convince me of anything." I went up against

the hooch again. "Listen, sweetheart, you're no more Melva Dominic than I'm Rudy Nureyev. The real Melva is on the shadow side of forty. She's only about five-foot-two. Also—"

The telephone jangled. We stopped parrying. A few seconds later Sara poked her turned-up nose into the cubicle and said, "I have Melva Dominic on the line." She looked from me to the raven-haired knockout and back again. She didn't smile, or scowl, or anything. "The Melva Dominic from Boston."

"I'll take it," I said, grabbing the horn. "Hello, Miss Dominic."

A shy voice said, "Hello, Mr. Coleridge. I believe you've been looking for me."

"No, not you. I'm after the bona fide Melva Dominic."

Her reply was a light lilting laugh. "Your secretary must have misunderstood, Mr. Coleridge. My name is Melva Dominic. It really is."

"Can you prove it?"

"Of course."

"Papers? A driver's license? A Social Security card? That sort of thing?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I believe it. You've found the Instant Identity Factory, too. Can you buzz down to New York?"

"Yes. I live just a few minutes from Logan Airport . . . Wait . . ."

"Wait?"

"Who are you? Why are you— Stay away!"

"Miss Dominic?"

No answer. Then:

"Please—it's all a mistake—"

Four loud reports.

In twenty-two years of running the affairs of World-Wide, I'd never heard pistol shots on a telephone wire. I was pretty sure I was hearing them now. Four shots, evenly spaced. Professional.

"Melva?"

The line went dead.

I slammed down the receiver. "Come on, Dreamboat," I said to the Roselle Park version of Melva Dominic. "We're catching the next shuttle to Boston. I think your namesake up there has come to dust."

To my surprise she put up no struggle. Hand in hand we dashed toward the elevator. On our way past Sara's desk I scooped up the Chanel No. 19 letter from Boston. I needed the address.

Sara gave Roselle Park a look of open envy.

The elevator stopped at every floor going down, which it always does when time is pressing. Finally it thumped to ground level at 47th Street. Roselle Park and I skittered for the front entrance.

Sunlight filtered down through the perpetual midtown smog and grime. It painted little patches of gold on the pavement. The street had its usual midday traffic, yellow cabs vying with Uncle Sol to bring a touch of color to the pervading drabness.

I saw a black Cadillac limousine illegally parked at the curb directly in front of us. For an instant the significance of the limo failed to register. Then I saw a glint of sun on steel. I saw a shaft of light fall on a familiar yellow mustache. That did it. I jerked Roselle suddenly back toward the World-Wide building. She yelped: I shouted.

Too late.

A burst of gunfire erupted from a side window of the Caddy. I dove for the pavement. So did she.

I was bruised and breathless, but otherwise okay.

Roselle Park was dead before she hit the concrete.

It was an execution, a rub-out, a murder in the course of business. I had seen gang-style executions before, but never at such close range. It was a murder without emotion, without amenities. A murder without icing.

I canceled the trip to Boston.

Eyewitnesses are usually about as valuable as slag in a steel mill, but this time half a dozen bystanders gave the police the license number of the Caddy. A young black kid even chased the limo for two blocks on foot, finally losing it west of Ninth Avenue when he was tackled by an alert patrolman. The kid was frisked, questioned, and released.

The car was recovered on Eleventh Avenue a few minutes later. It had been stolen an hour back from an East Side parking lot.

After telling my story to a sleepy-eyed detective sergeant from Homicide, I rode the elevator back to World-Wide. I felt washed-out, depressed.

The fourth floor hadn't changed much. It was still in need of demolition.

Sara knew nothing about the shooting below, but she didn't act too concerned. She yawned when I told her about it, and went back to her reading. Since there hadn't been much filing or typing to do the last few months, she'd been leafing her way through a pile of Agatha Christie novels. An avid fan of the Great Dame, she pored

over Agatha's urbane puzzles, she said, to escape the harsh realities of 47th Street.

Back in my office I wearily traced down the telephone number for an address on Hennessy Street, Thatcher, Arizona, where the third Melva Dominic claimed to live.

I guess she did live there, because the noise I got when I called the number was a lot of anguished wailing at the other end of the line. Something about a Louise Sprague—"poor dear Louise!"—who had just been gunned down at the Tucson airport while waiting for a flight to New York.

I hung up and told Sara the latest casualty count.

Three Melva Dominics.

All dead.

Then it hit me like a bolo punch. The killings might not be over yet. There might be another murder to go. There was at least one more Melva Dominic on the loose—the one who had phoned this morning and talked to Sara. She was supposed to call back at three.

I checked my Timex. 2:59. A minute passed. The phone rang.

"Mr. Coleridge?" It was a throaty feminine voice, the kind that can cozen hardheaded businessmen out of yachts and sables, diamonds and negotiables. The South oozed out of that voice like juice oozing from chitlins.

"Melva?"

"Why, Mr. Coleridge, how wonderful of you! Did you recognize my voice? I'll bet you caught my act in Cal City or Reno! Am I right?"

"No, Melva. This is the first time I've caught your act. And listen, doll, you'd better drop that act pretty quick if you want to keep your lungs vacuuming air. It's open season on Melva Dominics."

Her laugh had the same carefree trill as one I'd heard that morning—from a lady whose corpse was now on its way to the Boston city morgue.

"Where do you live, Melva?"

"Why, Mr. Coleridge, you shameless shamus, you! I don't give out my address. Not like that, not at the drop of a hint!"

"I'm not trying to date you, doll. 'Love is not all,' as the green-eyed poet says. Besides, my bulletproof vest is at the cleaners, and with you in sight I'd need it. I'm trying to protect you."

"How sweet! Mr. Coleridge, you sound like such a strong chivalrous man. I can hardly resist you. A brave detective, and tough."

Tough, I thought. That's me. Coleridge is tough. Tough as a three-

dollar steak, but with a heart as big as a wheel of cheddar cheese and as soft as a wedge of brie.

I took notice to the bourbon, lowering the glass carefully toward one of the two hundred or more rings of brown stain that decorate the gray enamel of my desk.

"Listen, Melva. Tell me where I can find you. Tell me quick, because you're in big trouble. This is rubout day for Melva Dominics."

She hesitated.

"Don't hesitate, doll."

"I'm at the Port Authority Bus Terminal," she said, a note of pique in her voice. "On Eighth Avenue, I think. I got in from Winston-Salem a few minutes ago."

"Stay there," I said, "and light up a butt. There's a Hoffritz store on the street level. Wait for me at the jackknife counter. I'll meet you there in ten minutes."

I chug-a-lugged the last four ounces of bourbon, filed the empty in my wastebasket, and told Sara where I was going. She blew me a kiss, then went back to *Murder in Mesopotamia*.

The Port Authority Bus Terminal, where I park my four-year-old Plymouth, is a massive building of tan brick and concrete completely surrounded by urban horrors. The more respectable social causes are represented inside by wandering missionaries and stern-faced fanatics who sit behind bannered card tables and hope against hope.

I pushed my way through the pre-rush-hour crowd at the Eighth Avenue entrance, vaguely aware that I had picked up a tail. I paused at the newsstand and tried to get a clear make on my shadow. It was easy. He was thin and pockmarked, yellow-mustached, and outfitted like a rhinestone cowboy. Harry Handlebars.

No introductions were called for. I walked up to him, yanked a hot-rod magazine off his beak, and said, "I take it there's a contract out on little Melva."

"You take it right, Coleridge," he drawled. "Fifty thousand boffos riding on her head."

"For what?"

Harry glanced around casually. "What the hell," he said. "I don't see it can hurt much to tell you."

"It'll make you feel all warm inside."

"Sure it will." He drew a hairy paw across the craters of his chin. "It goes back fifteen years. It's an old contract. Melva Dominic was

working The Fortinbras in Vegas. She got close and cosy with Mr. Eff, the boss there. Too cosy, if you know what I mean."

"Spell it out."

"What I mean is, one thing led to another. She learned a lot about the operation. Learned about the skim. Learned where the mob's cash was kept, how it got delivered. She always had a weakness for cash, according to Mr. Eff. Didn't go in for jewels or fancy clothes, but loved that green stuff. One morning she up and—"

"Lifted it."

"Yeah. A heist. Did it by herself. A whole week's skim, which is, one hell of a lot of cash."

"She disappeared."

"Like Jimmy Hoffa, only alive. She had her moves planned like a pro."

"Mr. Eff was unhappy."

"Unhappy? He was purple like a turnip. The mob was likewise unhappy. Mr. Eff was lucky not to end up the way Bugsy did, looking like a bloody Chinese checkerboard. Finally Mr. Eff had to dig into his own pocket to square himself with—well, you know."

"Mr. Eff didn't like that."

"He barked more than usual. He snarled and foamed. Mr. Eff, he's the wrong guy to cross. He put a price on Melva's head. Fifty thousand. It's still there, or was until today. As of now Mr. Eff owes a nice even two hundred G's on the contract—unless he can straighten out the whole mess better'n I think he can."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning Melva Dominics are turning up under every rock from here to Frisco."

"Hey, wait a minute. Didn't you say two hundred G's? That means four dead Melvas. My count is three."

"There's a chilled Melva down in Aruba," he said. "She probably ain't on your scratch sheet yet. Miami Max hit her about three hours ago. He's claiming his fifty G's down there."

"And you're claiming it in New York."

"Come on, Coleridge. I'm too modest to brag."

"You're not modest, you're greedy."

"Well, fifty grand ain't penny ante. I'm not knocking it. But a hundred grand would be my kind of day. Which is why I'm tailing you again."

So here he was, Harry Handlebars, the torpedo who had iced Miss Roselle Park. Here he was, itching to cool off Miss Winston-Salem.

It was time for the refrigeration to stop. It was time to warm things up.

I threw a straight left jab to set him up, classical style, the way Sugar Ray Robinson would have thrown it. I used to work out in Stillman's Gym; and twenty years ago I had a punch. But I'm not in Sugar Ray's class. Never was.

Before I could jolt him with a short right hook, he got inside me and butted the top of his yellow skull into my chest. I grunted and staggered back.

He reached inside his plaid jacket and came out with a shiny .32 automatic.

Enough with the boxing. I aimed my right foot at him, kicked his neat little .32 over the newsstand for a field goal. A well dressed gent snatched it up off the floor, no hesitation, and ran away with it. So much for well dressed gents at the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

Then Harry Handlebars parted company with his senses. He rushed me. He ran into a stiff solid left that I'd launched in the other direction. I heard something crack, and when I looked down at him, his eyes had rolled up toward the ceiling. He didn't move.

I did. Before the cops got the hang of things.

Thirty seconds later I was inside the Hoffritz emporium, examining an assortment of jackknives and hunting knives. I was breathing hard. There was a well stacked little brunette standing next to me, also engrossed in knives.

"Hi," I said. "You must be the fifth Melva Dominic."

She smiled without warmth. "No. I'm Elsa Schlotterbach. But I can take you to Melva Dominic if you want me to."

I stared hard at her. She was about 45, in fine repair, with wide violet eyes, a pointed chin, and a look of quiet competence. She stood maybe five-two. Her voice was the sexy Southern drawl I had heard on the phone.

"I'd swear you were Melva Dominic."

"I thought about being Melva Dominic," she said levelly. "Until a few minutes ago. But then this nice man behind the counter"—she pointed toward a bearded Hoffritz clerk—"began filling me in on some of the recent obits."

"And you decided to pull out of the Dominic sweepstakes?"

"I decided to tell you my real name. Elsa Schlotterbach. I think I'd rather be Elsa than Melva."



"It's safer. But not as profitable. You lose a legacy of eighty million that way."

"Win some, lose some. I know where Melva Dominic is."

"Uh huh. That's what I'm supposed to be finding out. How did you happen to find out?"

"I used to room with her. Twelve years ago."

That stopped me for a minute. "In North Carolina?"

"In New Jersey. Parsippany. She called herself Mary Hedstrom in those days. Do you have a car, Mr. Coleridge?"

"You're very fast with the non sequiturs, Elsa. As a matter of fact I do. It's parked on top of this brick-pile."

"Would you like to visit Melva?"

"What do you think?"

A few minutes later we were under the Hudson River, wheeling west. The tunnel stretched out ahead of us like a hollow, illuminated snake.

Escaping into the spring sunshine, we drove through the Secaucus marshland, past the gleaming new Sports Complex, under fluffy clouds that lay piled above Route 3 like pink cotton candy. Traffic was light, and before long the garish commercial glut of Route 46 began reeling past us like technicolor scenes from a bad movie.

Miss Schlotterbach said nothing for the first fifteen miles, just sitting over against the door and watching the mileposts loom up and disappear.

After a while she started to inch her way closer to me, and all at once she wanted to talk. The words flowed out like Southern Comfort at a three-day convention of Sun Belt politicians.

"When Melva and I first met," she said, "we both had studio apartments in Parsippany. Nobody knew much about anybody else in Parsippany in those days. It was like an old-fashioned boom town. Houses and apartments were springing up everywhere. I worked for a small ad agency, and she worked for a five-and-dime store. We got acquainted at a bar in Lake Hiawatha. We compared the wages we were making and decided we'd be better off sharing a two-bedroom apartment."

"I'm listening," I said. Her voice had a kind of dreamy quality to it, as if she was making up the story as she went along.

"Everything worked out fine. No serious arguments. No jealous boy friends. She lived her life, I lived mine."

"An idyll."

"Idylls went out with lances and chain mail, Coleridge. We got along."

"Until when?"

"Until '65. Early June."

"What happened then?"

She shuddered a little, and I reached out a hand to comfort her. It fell on her knee, and she responded with a karate chop.

"Do you know anything about Parsippany?" she asked.

"Only what I read in the travel brochures."

"Well, the main street of Parsippany is Route 46. There aren't any sidewalks on Route 46. No crosswalks. But you've got to cross that damn road every now and then, either to catch a bus or to get to your parked car."

"Yeah. So?"

"So Melva was crossing Route 46 one night. It was after nine o'clock, but it was barely dark. A sports car screamed out of a liquor store parking lot and slammed into her. It dragged her about two hundred feet on the pavement. Turned the left side of her into raw hamburger. The driver didn't brake, didn't stop."

"An accident?"

"It's hard to say. The police thought so. I wasn't so sure."

"Melva? DOA?"

"No. She was rushed to the hospital in critical condition. She lived for three days. Mostly unconscious. But she woke up long enough to make a last request."

"With you sitting conveniently by her bedside?"

Elsa looked at me sideways. "She didn't have any relatives."

I took that in and nodded. I figured it had to be a pretty handy coincidence, this deathbed request.

Elsa said, "Turn right."

I turned right. The newly paved blacktop under us was called Putnam Road, and it skirted a cemetery. Elsa pointed toward the stone fence surrounding it. We drove in at the main gate.

"I never knew her as Melva Dominic, you know. I knew her as Mary Hedstrom. But as she was dying, she asked me to do her a favor. Asked me to buy her a headstone. She died as Mary Hedstrom. That's what her death certificate says. But she didn't want the marker over her grave to say that. It was a lie, she said. A stone-carver will carve whatever you tell him to. And the caretaker of the cemetery couldn't care less. Stop here."

We stopped, got out of the car, and walked across a green blanket

of grass. And there it was, neatly chiseled proof, a flat little planchet of granite standing off by itself. It said: "Melva Dominic, 1929-1965."

"Poor Melva," I said. "But no. She wasn't poor, was she? Little Melva wasn't poor, in spite of her rent-sharing roommate and her job in a five-and-dime. Little Melva had money."

Elsa looked up at me, coloring. "That's right. She had quite a bundle in her savings account. She left it to me."

"Six figures?"

Elsa frowned, laid a finger to her lips. "Let's say it was more than enough to pay for the headstone. Quite a bit more. I guess Melva must have earned big money somewhere."

"Uh huh," I said. "Somewhere."

We climbed back into the car. The Plymouth's tires spewed gravel as I whipped the wheel back toward the Big Apple, once Bright and Golden, now Cored and Peeled.

For a long time neither of us spoke. I was thinking of four dead imposters with their silly but expensive sets of forged identification. Maybe she was thinking of them, too.

On Route 3 eastbound you can see the New York skyline rise up in front of you like a paper cutout. It seems to sit there on the horizon, gray and fantastic, with no more reality than a carved-to-order gravestone in a Parsippany boneyard.

As far as Mrs. Bootsie Foote Dominic Olmsted would know, the case was closed. Melva Dominic had turned up. She was no heiress-to-be, though. She was just another slab of meat, the fifth slab to bear the name.

But I knew better.

I've been tracking wandering daughters for a long time.

I gazed across the seat. The demure-looking brunette beside me had introduced herself on the phone as Melva Dominic. And why not? That's who she was. No wild kid any more, but then neither am I.

I pulled two dogeared photos from my shirt pocket and examined them under the rim of the steering wheel. The wide eyes, the straight nose, the pointed chin, the high cheekbones—thirty years later, but there was no question about it.

The lady sitting next to me was Charlie Corkscrew's natural daughter, Melva Dominic.

"Six figures," I said thoughtfully, aiming the picture side of the

old photos her way. "It's a better wad than you can make dealing blackjack. But it's a digit or two away from eighty million bucks."

"Those things happen."

"There may be an angle. I figure you're entitled to the eighty million."

She looked at me, soft and interested: "You're a sweet guy. But what would I do with the eighty million? Buy myself a diamond-studded casket?"

"You've got a point there, Melva."

"Please don't call me Melva. Not now, not ever again. Mama can keep her money."

I dropped my palm lightly to her knee. This time she didn't club it away.

I said, "Who's actually buried under that tombstone?"

She moved closer. "If I tell you, Coleridge—if I tell you the truth, what will you tell Mama?"

"I'll tell Mrs. Olmsted exactly what that piece of Parsippany granite tells her. No more, no less."

Her lips played across the stubble of my chin. "Thanks, Coleridge. You're a prince."

"I try," I said. "Even without my lance and chain mail, I try. Let me guess who's buried back there."

"One guess."

"Well, I figure that Mary Hedstrom alias of yours gave you pretty good cover. It kept the mob away for three years. But it was still a phony identity, with forged papers. Maybe you wanted a real identity, with real papers."

"You're brilliant," she breathed.

"You needed something bona fide. Something that would stand up against any search by Mr. Eff and his goons."

Her head rested against my shoulder.

I said, "I'd guess that Elsa Schlotterbach is the dame who's buried back there in Parsippany. Not little Melva, but little Elsa. The pretzel who died crossing Route 46."

Melva looked up at me. Her violet eyes shone. "That's right, Coleridge. I didn't inherit any money from Elsa. She was broke. Mary Hedstrom was the one with money in the bank. My money. Vegas money. What I inherited from Elsa Schlotterbach was her identity. I've been using it ever since."

I shook my head admiringly. "You're a shrewd damsel all right. First you bury Elsa under the Mary Hedstrom alias. Then you put

a Melva Dominic marker over her grave, just in case. You turned out to be one fast-shuffling roommate."

"Was I wrong, Coleridge? Was I wrong to do it?"

"You were right, sweetheart. Right as Rilke."

She nodded. "Elsa didn't seem to mind."

I chewed on that for a while, couldn't digest it. I floored the accelerator of the Plymouth, shuddered past a slow-moving truck that claimed to be paying \$4,000 a year in road-use taxes. Four thousand bucks—a nice round amount, just about the fee I figured Bootsie Olmsted owed me for the caper now concluded. Not a bad fee either, but a little short of Melva's lost inheritance of \$80,000,000.

Four thousand bucks. Chicken feed to the nabobs, but to me it was T-bone steak, with plenty of hooch to wash it down. The fee wouldn't buy much at Cartier's, but it represented a lot more cash than I'd had on the World-Wide books since—when? Since a couple of years back, I guess, when Pick-Up-Sticks came in at Aqueduct at 300-to-1.



Lika Van Ness

Mr. Anonymous

**Wednesday:** Jerry's left for the office and I can breathe. I wish I could sleep late and avoid these breakfast squabbles, but I can't—and I won't pretend to, either. The only silver lining to insomnia is seeing the sun come up and I'm not about to deny myself *that* or the first cup of coffee from the pot, or first look at *The Times*. The skyline this morning was like an overexposed photograph, the buildings charcoal-green against the first light. But dawn in New York is always breathtaking. It's my favorite time of the day. Immediately followed by my least favorite: breakfast with my husband.

His putdown this morning was you, Diary. Why would a grown woman confide in a book instead of a friend? Why don't I discuss more with him if I have so much to say? Well, I'd much rather discuss things with you than with him, and friends are hooey. And of course there are things I can share with you that I can't with him or with anyone. You're my seventh veil.

Well, I'm not going to let it ruin my day. Life is too short and there are wonders to enjoy. I'm meeting Stephen at the museum at 11:00. Now that it's summer I don't have to work at the gallery on Wednesdays or Fridays. I wish it would stay July forever. I love everything about summer—fewer clothes, fewer working hours, fewer people in the city. Alex, dearly as I love him, off to camp. The hum of the air conditioners. Walking where I want to go instead of depending on the miserable transportation in this city. The trees green, the air heavy and sweet, everyone rested and healthy and expectant. The freedom. The possibilities.

**Friday:** Jerry and I are going to Montauk for the weekend. To his surprise I agreed with him at breakfast that we should get off together and try to recapture what we seem to be losing. And why not? Stephen has gone to New Jersey on some marksmen's convention or other. His preoccupation with guns is the only thing about him that disturbs me. I'm jealous, I suppose. But better guns than another woman.

**Sunday:** Montauk is a disaster. The inn is full of lovers and last

night Jerry and I sat like wooden Indians over the candlelit mousse while seduction bloomed all around us. But this morning I got chills in my stomach watching the surf and then I took a lovely long walk down the beach. The huddled vegetation, the piny smoke, the cold sea air. If I were really free I'd have a house on a beach someplace where it's always summer.

Returning to the inn I noticed a large family group picnicking behind a sand dune under a purple umbrella. Everyone in the group, young and old, wore a different kind of hat. They were like something out of *Juliet of the Spirits* or *To the Lighthouse*. I had an urge to paint them but lost it when I spotted Jerry walking toward me from the inn. He, too, had seen the family and had such a soupy expression on his face that I just couldn't bear it. How quickly he would have us raising a family that size and moving to St. Louis to be near his parents. He never misses an opportunity to get the message across.

I walked back here with him in silence and immediately reached for you. Until then he hadn't known I'd brought you along. He turned pale and left. I hope I won't see him again until it's time to leave.

*Tuesday:* I thought Jerry would be more quarrelsome than ever after his failed weekend, but he has been very quiet at breakfast. At dinner, too. I found myself tonight making small talk to fill in the silence, but I'm not going to do it again. Let him be uncomfortable. Let him stew.

*Wednesday:* I had a vile phone call this morning just after Jerry left for the office. It was more threatening than obscene and I hung up immediately, but I had the impression it was someone I know—or someone I have known. But who would get any kick out of threatening me? I mind my own business—when people let me.

*Thursday:* Stephen didn't show up at the museum yesterday. He's usually waiting in the garden when I arrive, but he wasn't there. I waited and searched until 1:00, then phoned his office—no answer—and his home, but the phone rang and rang. Ruth must have been out organizing another charity ball.

It must be terrible trying to fill your days when you're too rich to work, especially when that's what your husband married you for.

*Friday:* Still no word from Stephen, and I can't reach him. I don't know whether to be worried or furious. Could he have met with an

accident last weekend? Why isn't Ruth at home? Those wretched guns of his!

At the gallery yesterday the honorable and prim-seeming Mr. Plum was in a black mood about something. (You and I know better, don't we, Diary, about how honorable Rafael Plum is when it comes to art dealers and how prim when it comes to his women employees.) Perhaps someone has beaten him at his own game. Whatever it is, I hope he is over it by Monday. It is no pleasure being there when he is like that, I assure you.

*Monday:* For the first time since we were married eight years ago, I wish Jerry and I had more friends to invite in. Superficial as friends are, they would fill this terrible silence he has been imposing on us for over a week now. Blessedly though, he is working late tonight and I won't have to sit through a wordless dinner with him.

He went to the office early this morning to do some homework. I thought homework was work you did at home, but that's what he called it.

There is still no answer at Stephen's office or at his house, and no word from him. Could he have gone away on vacation without letting me know? Maybe he's away on unexpected business.

Mr. Plum is still spreading a dark cloud, and his ill humor seems especially directed at me. Well, I don't care. If he has a grievance he can tell me outright. Or doesn't he dare?

It would be helpful to ask Myra or Jean if they know what's behind it, but I'd rather die than go to them. I wonder if it's in any way connected with Stephen, who usually comes by the gallery several times a week but to my knowledge hasn't been in for two weeks.

*Tuesday:* I received another of those disgusting phone calls this morning. The caller is definitely a man and he gave me reason to believe he knows things about me that only someone who truly knows me would. I'd tell Jerry about him but the caller mentioned Stephen, and others besides Stephen.

Now I'll worry every time Jerry answers the phone.

A second phone call, right on the heels of the first, was almost as disturbing but in a different way. It was Linda Hatfield, my roommate on East 66th Street, around the corner from the gallery, before Jerry and I were married. Since Jerry was dating her before he met me, it has been too awkward to keep up the acquaintance.

I don't think she has ever married—she identified herself on the



phone as Linda Hatfield. She probably hasn't ever moved from the old apartment because I often run into her on my way to and from the gallery. I give her a cool reception, too, yet she called to ask me if I'd like to attend a matinee with her tomorrow afternoon. She has an extra ticket that her theater partner can't use; and suddenly she thought to ask me. Isn't that pathetic? Can you imagine anything more deadly than attending a matinee every week, come hell or high water? God, she must be lonely.

I told her that although I do have Wednesdays off, I couldn't possibly get out of a previous commitment. She sounded disappointed. Oh, well, "Here's to the ladies who lunch . . ."

*Wednesday:* It's only midmorning and I've just hung up from the third anonymous phone call in an hour. It does no good to hang up and then not answer the inevitable ringing that follows—he would let it ring forever. These calls are the same as the others, only worse. His insinuating voice, the same recital of facts reminding me I'm not just a name in the phone book. Describing my addiction to *objets d'art*, expensive clothes, perfume, and gin. Repeating the details of my parents' suicide, of my estrangement with my brother, Judge Peter W. Daniels of Denver, Colorado. He knows Jerry is a lawyer and that we have an eight-year-old son named Alex and no pets. That I was pregnant before Jerry and I were married. Who could possibly know all these things—and who has nothing better to do than remind me of them? Who could be so cruel? Or so sick?

Linda Hatfield? But it's a man. Maybe she has a sick boy friend and this is how they get their jollies.

Who else has a grudge against me? The TV repairman? Forget it, he couldn't possibly know these things—unless he got a look at you, and that's unlikely. It couldn't be that insipid neighbor with the Tyrolean hat who has been flinging epithets at me ever since I sent him the cleaner's bill for the dress his Weimaraner soiled on the elevator. Myra? Jean? No, if I read them correctly they're too cool, too busy with their own lives. No, these people are too irrelevant. It's somebody else. It's somebody I *know*. Somebody I'm overlooking . . .

*Thursday:* Rafael Plum called me into his office this afternoon and asked for my resignation. After ten years! When I asked him why, he shrugged. The economy, he said with no particular effort to sound convincing. The bad times

Let Myra go, I told him. Or Jean. They were both hired years after I was.

They're indispensable, he said, and working full-time. Besides, he added, he has been receiving complaints from important clients about my rudeness and off-handedness. That's a lie, of course. I bend over backward to be charming and helpful to every one of our customers, whether they are important or not.

All right, I told him, for some reason you want me out. I don't care about the job. I grew tired of it long ago and won't have a moment's trouble getting a better one within five blocks of here. But I'm amazed you think you can fire me. Some well chosen words from me and you'll be out of business, in jail, explaining yourself to a long line of husbands, or all three! How can you possibly think you can fire me?

He looked at me for a long time through those blue-tinted glasses of his. All right, he said finally, we'll talk about it again on Monday. Meantime he'd like to know—how much would I consider fair severance pay?

I told him to guess—to make it a careful guess, and to make it in cash.

*Saturday:* Alex just phoned from camp. He was crying and said he was going to run away. Jerry went to the office this morning on some important business, but I told Alex to sit tight and his father and I would be up to get him, by tomorrow noon at the very latest.

I phoned Jerry at the office and he's not there. I tried to reach Mr. Crosscup, the director of the camp, and he and his assistant are out with the 8-10 years olds on an overnight hike. The secretary said that Alex is with them and they are beyond reach of a phone. I told her that couldn't be strictly true because I had received a phone call from my son within the past five minutes. She said she would send one of the counselors after the group and will call me back when she has some word.

I'm not going to wait around forever to hear from her or from Jerry. If Jerry isn't home in an hour, I'm going up there without him.

*Monday:* I drove up to Echo Lake without Jerry on Saturday. The counselor had caught up with the overnight group and Alex and the director came back with him to the camp. Alex looked at me as if he had never seen me before in his life. He insisted he had made no

call and Mr. Crosscup assured me with infuriating courtesy that there was no possible way Alex could have got to a telephone from where they had been in the mountains. I told him I had never agreed that my child should be so far out of reach of civilization, whereupon he produced a paper Jerry had signed allowing Alex to go on overnight hikes and canoe trips no farther than twenty-four hours' distance from modern communications.

Alex and I took a walk and I pleaded with him to return to New York with me, but he refused flat out. He doesn't like Jerry and me, he said—he hates us. At first he wouldn't tell me why. Then he did.

Did you call me all the way up here to say these terrible things, I asked him. I *didn't* call you up here, he screamed, and ran away from me into the woods. I let him go. I've got to think before I try talking to him again. I hated my parents, but they gave me nothing. Jerry and I give Alex everything.

Could my son be insane, as my parents were? They say mental illness skips a generation. It certainly skipped ours. Peter has behaved hatefully toward me since we settled the estate but he's a judge, after all, and what could be more stable?

I forgot to tell you on Saturday that Stephen called, right on the heels of the call from Alex, wanting to see me and explain his absence. I told him I was on my way upstate to see Alex and had no time to talk to him.

I didn't go to the gallery today. Rafael will have to wait until tomorrow for our talk. But it won't be pleasant, and I'm aching for a pleasant conversation with *somebody*.

*Tuesday:* Rafael and I have had our talk and I walked out with \$5,000. It's a ridiculously small amount, but he knows very well that I will call on him when I am in need of more.

I took a long walk in the heat, away from the apartment—it's so morbidly silent these days except for that bitchy phone. I walked all the way from the gallery down to lower Broadway. It's a long way but I've always been a great walker. By the time I realized where I was, I was thirsty and stopped at a bar. I forget its name, but I remember that it had a friendly old mirror over the bar and that I stayed for quite a while. It was dark when I returned to the apartment—dark and empty.

What is keeping Jerry so busy these days? He's never here for meals any more and often he doesn't even come home to sleep. I'd suspect an affair, but that would be impossible with Jerry. He's too

much of a family man at heart. Besides, he adores me. It's a very cold proposition, adoration, but I can live with it until it suits me to move on.

*Wednesday:* The phone woke me before 5:00 this morning. Jerry wasn't home yet and I thought it would be he, but it was Mr. Anonymous. When he started in about me I hung up and went to the kitchen to make some coffee. When the phone rang again, I let it ring until I couldn't stand it any more and had to pick up the receiver.

Your husband wants a divorce, he said.

I'll kill him first, I thought. How would you know? I asked him.

I know everything about you, he sneered. I know about your husband, who wants a divorce at any cost, and about Stephen, who means you no more good than you mean him, and about your brother who hates you, and your son who hates you. I know that you have no friends, nor really any friendly acquaintances. I know that you've lost your job and have \$5,000 that you stupidly haven't deposited in the bank.

That's not true, I said.

It's true, he assured me. I saw you at the bar yesterday. And you saw me. I learned several new things about you. I had known that you drink too much but I hadn't yet realized that you talk too much to strangers and you wear too much perfume. Funny how when you get better acquainted with some women they lose their appeal.

I reached out to shut his voice off in a hurry. Don't hang up! he commanded. That stopped me and I waited.

That's better, he said.

I held my breath. He didn't speak for more than two minutes by the wall clock.

Okay then, he said. I'll be over.

And he hung up.

That was a half hour ago. I've packed a suitcase, which I've left open on the bed, with the money in it, and the small revolver Stephen gave me. I'm not sure what's going to happen next, but it's clear I can't stay here. But where will I go? Oh, I need time. I need more time to think.

Who could it be? Who knows all these things about me? Who could hate me so much?

Jack London

## The Dead Do Not Come Back

A strange life has come to an end in the death of Mr. Sedley Crayden, of Crayden Hill. Mild, harmless, he was the victim of a strange delusion that kept him pinned, night and day, in his chair for the last two years of his life. The mysterious death—or, rather, disappearance—of his elder brother, James Crayden, seems to have preyed on his mind, for it was shortly after that event that his delusion began to manifest itself.

Mr. Crayden never gave any explanation of his strange conduct. There was nothing the matter with him physically; and, mentally, the alienists found him normal in every way save for his one remarkable idiosyncrasy. His remaining in his chair was purely voluntary, an act of his own will. And now he is dead—and the mystery is unsolved.

—Extract from the *Newton Courier-Times*

Briefly, I was Mr. Sedley Crayden's confidential servant and valet for the last eight months of his life. During that time he wrote a great deal in a manuscript that he kept always beside him, except when he drowsed or slept, at which times he invariably locked it in a desk drawer close to his hand.

I was curious to read what the old gentleman wrote, but he was too cautious and cunning. I never got a peep at the manuscript. If he were engaged on it when I attended him, he covered the top sheet with a large blotter. It was I who found him dead in his chair, and it was then that I took the liberty of abstracting the manuscript. I was very curious to read it, and I have no excuses to offer.

After retaining it in my secret possession for several years, and after ascertaining that Mr. Crayden left no surviving relatives, I have decided to make the nature of the manuscript known. It is very long, and I have omitted nearly all of it, giving only the more lucid fragments. It bears all the earmarks of a disordered mind, and various experiences are repeated over and over, while much is so vague and incoherent as to defy comprehension. Nevertheless, from reading it myself, I venture to predict that if an excavation is made in

the main basement, somewhere in the vicinity of the foundation of the great chimney, a collection of bones will be found which should very closely resemble those which James Crayden once clothed in mortal flesh.

—*Statement of Rudolph Hickler*

(Here follow the excerpts from the manuscript, made and arranged by Rudolph Hickler)

I never killed my brother. Let this be my first word and my last. Why should I kill him? We lived together in unbroken harmony for twenty years. We were old men, and the fires and tempers of youth had long since burned out. We never disagreed even over the most trivial things. Never was there such amity as ours.

We were scholars. We cared nothing for the outside world. Our companionship and our books were all-satisfying. Never were there such talks as we held. Many a night we sat up till two and three in the morning, conversing, weighing opinions and judgments, referring to authorities—in short, we lived at high and friendly intellectual altitudes.

He disappeared. I suffered a great shock. Why should he have disappeared? Where could he have gone? It was very strange. I was stunned. They say I was very sick for weeks. It was brain fever. This was caused by his inexplicable disappearance. It was at the beginning of the experience I hope here to relate that he disappeared.

How I have endeavored to find him! I am not an excessively rich man; yet I offered continually increasing rewards. I have advertised in all the papers and sought the aid of all the detective bureaus. At the present moment the rewards aggregate over fifty thousand dollars.

They say he was murdered. They also say murder will out. Then I say, why does not his murder come out? Who did it? Where is he? Where is Jim? My Jim?

We were so happy together. He had a remarkable mind, a most remarkable mind, so firmly founded, so widely informed, so rigidly logical that it was not at all strange that we agreed in all things. Dissension was unknown between us. Jim was the most truthful man I have ever met. In this, too, we were similar, as we were similar in our intellectual honesty.

We never sacrificed truth to make a point. We had no points to

make, we so thoroughly agreed. It is absurd to think that we could disagree on anything under the sun.

I wish he would come back. Why did he go? Who can ever explain it? I am lonely now, and depressed with grave forebodings—frightened by terrors that are of the mind and that put at naught all that my mind has ever conceived.

Form is mutable. This is the last word of positive science.

The dead do not come back. This is incontrovertible. The dead are dead, and that is the end of it, and of them.

And yet I have had experiences here—here in this very room, at this very desk, that— But wait. Let me put it down in black and white, in words simple and unmistakable. Let me ask some questions. Who mislays my pen? That is what I desire to know. Who uses up my ink so rapidly? Not I and yet the ink goes.

The answer to these questions would settle all the enigmas of the universe. I know the answer. I am not a fool. And some days, if I am plagued too desperately, I shall give the answer myself. I shall give the name of the one who mislays my pen and uses up my ink. It is so silly to think that I could use such a quantity of ink. The servant lies.

I have procured a fountain pen. I have always disliked the device, but my old stub pen had to go. I burned it in the fireplace. The ink I keep under lock and key. I shall see if I cannot put a stop to these lies that are being written about me.

And I have other plans. It is not true that I have recanted. I still believe that I live in a mechanical universe. It has not been proved otherwise to me, for all that I have peered over his shoulder and read his malicious statement to the contrary. He gives me credit for no less than average stupidity. He thinks I think he is real. How silly! I know he is a brain figment, nothing more.

There are such things as hallucinations. Even as I looked over his shoulder and read, I knew that this was such a thing. If I were only well, it would be interesting. All my life I have wanted to experience such phenomena.

And now it has come to me. I shall make the most of it.

What is imagination? It can make something where there is nothing. How can anything be something where there is nothing? How can anything be something and nothing at the same time?

I leave it for the metaphysicians to ponder. I know better. No

scholastics for me. This is a real world, and everything in it is real. What is not real, is not. So he is not.

Yet he tries to fool me into believing that he is—when all the time I know he has no existence outside of my own brain cells.

I saw him today, seated at the desk, writing. It gave me quite a shock, because I had thought he was quite dispelled. Nevertheless, on looking steadily, I found that he was not there—the old familiar trick of the brain. I have dwelt too long on what has happened. I am becoming morbid, and my old indigestion is hinting and muttering. I shall take exercise. Each day I shall walk for two hours.

It is impossible. I cannot exercise. Each time I return from my walk, he is sitting in my chair at the desk. It grows more difficult to drive him away. It is my chair. Upon this I insist. It *was* his, but he is dead and it is no longer his.

How one can be fooled by the phantoms of his own imagining! There is nothing real in this apparition. I know it. I am firmly grounded with my fifty years of study.

The dead are dead.

And yet, explain one thing. Today, before going for my walk, I carefully put the fountain pen in my pocket before leaving the room. I remember it distinctly. I looked at the clock at the time. It was twenty minutes past ten.

Yet on my return there was the pen lying on the desk. Someone had been using it. There was very little ink left. I wish he would not write so much. It is disconcerting.

There was one thing upon which Jim and I were not quite agreed. He believed in the eternity of the forms of things. I had little patience with him in this.

I laughed at the unseen world. Only the real was real, I contended, and what one did not perceive was not and could not be. I believed in a mechanical universe. Chemistry and physics explained everything. Oh, believe me, I know my logic, too. But he was very stubborn.

Once I made my confession of faith to him. It was simple, brief, unanswerable. Even as I write it now I know that it is unanswerable. Here it is. I told him: "I assert, with Hobbes, that it is impossible



to separate thought from matters that thinks. I assert, with Bacon, that all human understanding arises from the world of sensations. I assert, with Locke, that all human ideas are due to the functions of the senses. I assert, with Kant, the mechanical origin of the universe, and that creation is a natural and historical process. I assert, with Laplace, that there is no need of the hypothesis of a creator. And, finally, I assert, because of all the foregoing, that form is ephemeral. Form passes. Therefore we pass."

I repeat, it was unanswerable. Yet he answered with Paley's notorious fallacy of the watch. Also, he talked about radium, and all but asserted that the very existence of matter had been exploded by these later-day laboratory researches. It was childish. I had not dreamed he could be so immature.

How could one argue with such a man? I then asserted the reasonableness of all that is. To this he agreed, reserving, however, one exception. He looked at me, as he said it, in a way I could not mistake. The inference was obvious. That he should be guilty of so cheap a quip in the midst of a serious discussion astounded me.

The eternity of forms. It is ridiculous! Yet there is a strange magic in the words. If it be true, then he has not ceased to exist. Then he does exist.

This is impossible.

I have ceased exercising. As long as I remain in the room, the hallucination does not bother me. But when I return to the room after an absence, he is always there, sitting at the desk, writing. Yet I dare not confide in a physician. I must fight this out by myself.

He grows more importunate. Today, consulting a book on the shelf, I turned and found him again in the chair. This is the first time he has dared do this in my presence. Nevertheless, by looking at him steadily and sternly for several minutes, I compelled him to vanish.

This proves my contention. *He does not exist.* If he were an eternal form I could not make him vanish by a mere effort of my will.

This is getting damnable. Today I gazed at him for an entire hour before I could make him leave. Yet it is so simple. What I see is a memory picture. For twenty years I was accustomed to seeing him there at the desk. The present phenomenon is merely a recrudes-

cence of that memory picture—a picture which was impressed countless times on my consciousness.

I gave up today. He exhausted me, and still he would not go. I sat and watched him hour after hour. He takes no notice of me, but continually writes. I know what he writes, for I read it over his shoulder. It is not true. He is taking an unfair advantage.

Query: He is a product of my consciousness; is it possible, then, that entities may be created by consciousness?

We did not quarrel. To this day I do not know how it happened. Let me tell you. Then you will see.

We sat up late that never-to-be-forgotten last night of his existence. It was the old, old discussion—the eternity of forms. How many hours and how many nights we had consumed over it!

On this night he had been particularly irritating, and all my nerves were screaming. He had been maintaining that the human soul was itself a form, an eternal form, and that the light within his brain would go on forever and always.

I took up the poker.

"Suppose," I said, "I should strike you dead with this?"

"I would go on," he answered.

"As a conscious entity?" I demanded.

"Yes, as a conscious entity," was his reply. "I should go on, from plane to plane of higher existence, remembering my earth-life, you, this very argument—ay, and continuing the argument with you."

It was only argument. I swear it was only argument. I never lifted a hand. How could I? He was my brother, my elder brother Jim.

I cannot remember. I was very exasperated. He had always been so obstinate in this metaphysical belief of his.

The next I knew, he was lying on the hearth.

Blood was running. It was terrible. He must have fallen in a fit and struck his head. I noticed there was blood on the poker. In falling he must have struck upon it with his head.

And yet I fail to see how this can be, for I held it in my hand all the time. I was still holding it in my hand as I looked at it.

It is an hallucination. That is the only conclusion of common sense. I have watched the growth of it. At first it was only in the dimmest light that I could see him sitting in the chair. But as the time passed

and the hallucination, by repetition, strengthened, he was able to appear in the chair under the strongest lights.

That is the explanation. It is quite satisfactory.

I shall never forget the first time I saw it. I had dined alone downstairs. I never drink wine, so that what happened was eminently normal. It was in the summer twilight that I returned to the study. I glanced at the desk. There he was, sitting. It was so natural that before I knew, I cried out, "Jim!"

Then I remembered all that had happened.

Of course it was an hallucination. I knew that.

I took the poker and went over to it. He did not move nor vanish. The poker cleaved through the non-existent substance of the thing and struck the back of the chair. Fabric of fancy, that is all it was. The mark is there on the chair now where the poker struck. I pause from my writing and turn and look at it—press the tips of my fingers into the indentation.

He *did* continue the argument. I stole up today and looked over his shoulder. He was writing the history of our discussion. It was the same old nonsense about the eternity of forms. But as I continued to read, he wrote down the practical test I had made with the poker. Now this is unfair and untrue. I made no test. In falling he struck his head by accident on the poker.

Someday somebody will find and read what he writes. That will be terrible. I am suspicious of the servant, who is always peeping and peering, trying to see what I write. I must do something. Every servant I have had is curious about what I write.

Fabric of fancy. That is all it is. There is no Jim who sits in the chair. I know that.

Last night, when the house was asleep, I went down into the cellar and looked carefully at the soil around the chimney. It was untampered with. The dead do not rise up.

Yesterday morning, when I entered the study, there he was in the chair. When I had dispelled him, I sat in the chair myself all day. I had my meals brought to me. And thus I escaped the sight of him for many hours, for he now appears only in the chair.

I was weary, but I sat late until eleven o'clock. Yet when I stood

up to go to bed I looked around—and there he was. He had slipped into the chair on the instant.

Being only fabric of fancy, all day he had resided in my brain. The moment it was unoccupied, he took up his residence in the chair.

Are these his boasted higher planes of existence—his brother's brain and a chair? After all, was he not right? Has his eternal form become so attenuated as to be an hallucination? Are hallucinations real entities? Why not?

There is food for thought here. Someday I shall come to a conclusion upon it.

He was very much disturbed today. He could not write, for I had made the servant carry the pen out of the room in his pocket. But neither could I write.

The servant never sees him. This is strange. Have I developed a keener sight for the unseen? Or rather does it not prove the phantom to be what it is—a product of my own morbid consciousness beyond doubt?

He has stolen my pen again. Hallucinations cannot steal pens. This is unanswerable. And yet I cannot keep the pen always out of the room. I want to write myself.

I have had three different servants since my trouble came upon me, and not one has seen him. Is the verdict of their senses right?

Nevertheless, the ink goes too rapidly. I fill my pen more often than is necessary. And furthermore, only today I found my pen out of order. I did not break it.

I have spoken to him many times, but he never answers. I sat and watched him all morning. Frequently he looked at me, and it was obvious that he knew me.

By striking the side of my head violently with the heel of my hand, I can shake the vision of him out of my eyes. Then I can get into the chair; but I have learned that I must move very quickly in order to accomplish this. Often he fools me and is back again before I can sit down.

It is getting unbearable. He does not assume form slowly. He pops.

That is the only way to describe it. I cannot stand looking at him much more. That way lies madness, for it compels me almost to believe in the reality of what I know is not. Besides, hallucinations do not pop.

Thank God he only manifests himself in the chair. As long as I occupy the chair I am quit of him.

My device for dislodging him from the chair, by striking my head, is failing. I have to hit much more violently, and I do not succeed perhaps more than once in a dozen trials. My head is quite sore where I have so repeatedly struck it. I must use the other hand.

My brother was right. There is an unseen world. Do I not see it? Am I not cursed with the seeing of it all the time? Call it a thought, an idea, anything you will, still it is there. It is unescapable. Thoughts are entities. We create with every act of thinking. I have created this phantom that sits in my chair and uses my ink. Because I have created him is no reason that he is any the less real. He is an idea; he is an entity: therefore, ideas are entities, and an entity is a reality.

Query: If a man, with the whole historical process behind him, can create an entity, a real thing, then is not the hypothesis of a Creator made substantial? If the stuff of life can create, then it is fair to assume that there can be a He who created the stuff of life. It is merely a difference of degree.

I have not yet made a mountain nor a solar system, but I have made a something that sits in my chair.

This being so, may I not someday be able to make a mountain or a solar system?

All his days, down to today, man has lived in a maze. He has never seen the light. I am convinced that I am beginning to see the light—not as my brother saw it, by stumbling upon it accidentally, but deliberately and rationally.

My brother is dead. He has ceased. There is no doubt about it, for I have made another journey down into the cellar to see. The ground was untouched. I broke it myself to make sure, and I saw what made me sure.

My brother has ceased, yet have I recreated him. This is not my

old brother, yet it is something as nearly resembling him as I could fashion. I am unlike other men. I am a god.

I have created.

Whenever I leave the room to go to bed I look back—and there is my brother sitting in the chair. And then I cannot sleep because of thinking of him sitting through all the long night-hours.

And in the morning, when I open the study door, there he is, and I know he has sat there the night long.

I am becoming desperate from lack of sleep. I wish I could confide in a physician.

Blessed sleep! I have won to it at last!

Let me tell you. Last night I was so worn that I found myself dozing in my chair. I rang for the servant and ordered him to bring blankets. I slept. All night he was banished from my thoughts as he was banished from my chair. I shall remain in it all day. It is a wonderful relief.

It is uncomfortable to sleep in a chair. But it is more uncomfortable to lie in bed hour after hour and not sleep, and to know that he is sitting there in the cold darkness.

It is no use. I shall never be able to sleep in a bed again. I have tried it now, numerous times, and every such night is a horror.

If I could but only persuade *him* to go to bed! But no. He sits there and sits there—I know he does—while I stare and stare up into the blackness and think and think, continually think, of him sitting there.

I wish I had never heard of the eternity of forms.

The servants think I am crazy. That is but to be expected, and it is why I have never called in a physician.

I am resolved. Henceforth this hallucination ceases. From now on I shall remain in the chair. I shall never leave it. I shall remain in it night and day, day and night, and always.

I have succeeded. For two weeks I have not seen him. Nor shall I ever see him again. I have at last attained the equanimity of mind necessary for quiet philosophic thought.

I wrote a complete chapter today

It is very wearisome sitting in a chair. The weeks pass, the months come and go, the seasons change, the servants replace each other, while I remain. I only remain. It is a strange life I lead, but at least I am at peace.

He comes back no more.

There is no eternity of forms.

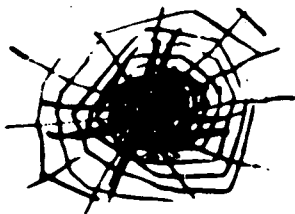
I have proved it.

For nearly two years now I have remained in this chair, and I have not seen him once. True, I was severely tired for a time. But it is clear that what I thought I saw was merely hallucination.

He never was.

Yet I do not leave the chair.

I am afraid to leave my chair.



Ellen Arthur

## The Scene of the Crime

“Could you let me have Number Twelve if it isn’t occupied?” I knew it wasn’t—I wouldn’t have been standing there asking for it if it was. I told him that twelve was my lucky number, that I had a sale to close in the morning, and the motel clerk looked up, a decency he’d neglected till then. He was a little man with fuzz on his ears and glasses that bit into a sharp nose, a nose that appeared locked in mid-sniff.

I could see that he didn’t care for me, as some short men do not care for tall men, and I could also see that he was wondering if I knew about Number 12. But he gave me the key, and I was able to turn my back and drop the visiting-fireman act.

I took the Volkswagen around, parked it in front of the cluster marked *Rooms 10–20*, and carried my suitcase down the covered cement walk. I paused to look down a tunnel-like opening between Room 15 and Room 16. There was a door with a bug light above it and a sign under the light: LAUNDRY, and beneath that, ICE. As I passed windows, some lighted, others dark, all with drawn curtains, I thought of my sister, Cara, taking this walk two weeks earlier, walking with a young sailor beside her. What on earth had gone wrong? How had she angered him? What could she have refused that young man—Cara, who never refused anyone anything?

The Lord knows I had tried to find out, tried my best to see the sailor, but his lawyer was inflexible. A man with no handles. Just a few hours ago he’d thrown me out of his office again, actually threatening me with a Peace Bond.

I unlocked the door of Number 12 and thought how much of a child Cara had been. Even at thirty-four she had been a child. She’d gone into this room like a little girl crawling into an abandoned refrigerator, full of anticipation, thinking of spooky secret fun and finding death instead. She must have been terrified. Peering into the dark room, I was suddenly ashamed. I called myself a voyeur, a morbid and foolish man. There was nothing rational in my coming here, and I like to think I’m rational.

Yet I reached inside for the light switch and entered the room—because Cara’s death had unsettled me so, and because I



couldn't shake the notion that here, alone in the place where she had died, away from family and friends, I might be able to understand what had happened.

I closed the door and looked around at once for the ice bucket, deliberately putting off a study of the room until I could make a drink. A few minutes later, filling the bucket, standing in the gloomy light that haloed the ice machine, I felt like the murderer himself. He had been here and had bought a soft drink from that humming machine over in the corner—he had admitted that much.

There was some validity in identifying with him. I *was*, in one sense, Cara's killer. Because I loved her best. If anyone could have deflected Cara, I was the one. I loved her best. It was wrong of me to care for her more than my good sister Rachel, more than my decent parents; but it had always been so. Perhaps if I'd tried harder—

Sometimes I could reach her. I had stopped her drinking. That was years ago, and not until after she'd wrecked her car and put our father in the hospital, but I did it. I stayed with her day and night. By the time she came to trial, Cara was finished with drinking for good—though the Lord knows she must have needed it now and then.

I went back to Room 12, fixed my drink, and examined the room. I tried hard to see something meaningful, but of course I couldn't. What an idiot I was! The room was like every other motel room—reproduced by cloning, marching to infinity, living up to the promise of all its twins. It would tell nothing, not a whisper. Everything in the room confirmed it: soap in a sealed wrapper, glass in a transparent paper bag, writing paper in an envelope in the center drawer. Who has been on the road in America and could not find his way stone-blind around such a room? What had I hoped to learn?

I sat with my Scotch, going slow because I knew I would make another as soon as the glass was empty. How else could I sit where the murderer must have sat before he put his hands around my sister's throat? Why had he done it? My one brief look at him had left me baffled. He seemed incredibly young, didn't look strong enough or cruel enough. But he'd done it, and then, stricken by what he'd done, had fled barefoot in the night, leaving Cara for the maid to find.

He had, of course, denied it when they caught him. He claimed to have gone out for a soft drink and returned to hear voices in the room: "What's the matter with you? This is me, Carolyn!" And an

angry male voice: "I know who you are." The young sailor said he ran, assuming that Cara had a husband who had tracked them to the motel. He had not known she was dead, he said, until they arrested him two days later.

A single word in his story, the name Carolyn, caused me to doubt his guilt momentarily. I thought George Kiley might have killed her—Cara had been married to him, and I must admit she gave him reasons to murder her. But that was a long time ago, and I realized at once that George wouldn't have bothered with Cara; he would never have slipped so clumsily between the rungs of the ladder he was climbing. George was a big man now, and he meant to be bigger.

No, the sailor did it. Cara must have mentioned her given name in some context or other, and he cleverly decided it would give his story the sound of truth. Well, he would pay now for whatever joy Cara might have brought him. People always did.

I sat listening to the anonymous sounds: traffic on the highway, crickets, a television playing, indistinct voices in the room next door, an occasional thud. Cara had died among such sounds.

I had seen her two nights before her death. She was appearing at the Court Lounge, and I went to see her. No one else in the family kept any contact with her, but occasionally I drove reasonable distances to hear her sing, to sit and talk with her. She had a moderately good voice and a strikingly intimate way of using it—a sort of piano-lounge voice. I enjoyed it. No—more than that—I was grateful for it, because, to be truthful, all of us, even I, had been relieved when Cara found this way to make a living. It kept her out of New England a good part of the time, and we'd been wondering how to do that. She became Cara, billing herself by the one name, and troubling our lives less than we'd ever dared hope.

I remember that she sang well that last time I saw her, seemed more beautiful than ever, and I was proud of her. Her soft smoky songs suited her; they were all of a piece with her tilted eyes and her full unsubtle mouth. She did surprise me with her final number, *Those Were the Days*. It wasn't a tempo she would ordinarily choose, but she handled it well, and I think of it now particularly because it was the last enjoyable part of that evening.

We had coffee together after closing, and I bullied her. I was angry that she hadn't told me she was coming to the Court, that I'd picked up the information by hearing her voice on a local radio talk show—a promotion for her current appearance. I was also more than a little annoyed at the things she'd told the talkmaster. They were views

I knew she held, but I never expected to hear her speak of them on the radio. "Suppose Mother had heard you?" I asked. "Or Rachel?"

She looked at me strangely, as if trying to place these people I'd mentioned. "Did they?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

She shrugged. "Well, then? Anyway, the man wanted a good interview—I couldn't let him down. But I'm sorry you heard it," she said, and I knew she meant it.

I argued and made her sad. I accused her—a stab I knew was false—of aping the new generation. I tried to make her consider the family. I spoiled that meeting, and even though I didn't know it was our last I went away angry with myself as well as with Cara.

Taking these thoughts with me to the window of the motel room, I parted the curtains and stared out at the highway, at the occasional car moving in the night like someone breathing in and out. I told myself that I couldn't have changed her, that she was never very different, not even when she was small and we had called her Carolyn. Hadn't she always given what was asked—anything—toys, candy, clothes, her company, her complicity? Once she pulled a fire alarm, and would only say that she was asked to do it. Lord, how she tormented our parents, such dutiful people, so religious.

I closed the curtains abruptly. The thought of my parents, the image of my mother at Cara's graveside—Rachel, too—their patient animal eyes. It was impossible to stand quietly, so I prowled the motel room, opening drawers, slamming them shut. I saw the extra blankets in the deep drawer, thick maroon blankets, probably never unfolded. Who needed them in a motel room? Such a warm place, full of the warmth of flesh. And, ah, yes, there was the writing paper—even more useless. People found other things to do, and the paper stayed pure in its pure packet.

I decided to tear it up, make a change, dent the complacency of the room. The maid would be astonished at having to replenish the silly envelope. I was standing with the paper in my hand, ready to rip, when I noticed something on the back of the envelope that I'd tossed onto the dresser. I can remember seeing myself in the mirror, my astounded face looking back at me.

It was a foolish thing that I saw marked on the envelope—or would have been if I hadn't known what it was. A scribble. Two small crosses inked thoughtlessly there—each with three tiny circles, two in the upper angles of the crossbeam and the third enclosing the intersection of the cross. The doodle had religious significance, the

three circles representing the members of the Holy Family. I knew because I had often drawn it myself—in imitation of my father. He had learned it sometime in childhood, perhaps putting it at the top of his papers in parochial school. My father. An usher in church, taking time between his duties to kneel in a rear pew, praying for Cara, praying with suffocating monotony.

I didn't have to ask myself why my father had done it—only why *now*, when Cara's life touched his so seldom? There had been times when I wouldn't have blamed him, times when Cara must have ground his soul too fine. Why, for example, hadn't he killed her that dawn when he found her, after a long night of searching, asleep on a littered beach, curled up on the sand, some man's shirt clutched in her upflung fist, and a smile on her still face? That was a time for murder.

Shortly before Cara died, I was reminded of that awful scene. I was walking along a pond beach, feeling disturbed by the carelessness of people—the discarded cans, the empty cigarette packs, the profusion of flip-top tabs, looking like female symbols, cheap aluminum statements of sin. Suddenly I was seized with the fear that if I kept walking I would see Cara stretched out amid the trash, perhaps just beyond the next bend . . . Three days later she was dead. Perhaps it was a premonition meant to prepare me for her death. But nothing, *nothing* could have prepared me for that motel room or lessened the impact of that damning scribble I held in my hand.

The envelope with the scribble had to be burned. With shaking fingers I began to tear it and stack it in the little ashtray. I struck a match and watched the flame catch up the crosses, curling and twisting them. Tiny stickmen dancing in fire. How had my father come to make them, I wondered. Had he stayed in the room with Cara's body? I couldn't imagine it.

Then I thought of the young sailor. My father had, appallingly, been waiting for him to return! Good God! The sailor had done right to flee—*"Let him who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak."* He had certainly saved himself.

But *had* he? I understood then for the first time the difficulty facing me, and I wished to God I had never come to this room. I didn't want to know that the sailor was innocent and that he was not at all safe. He and my father couldn't both be safe. It lay before me like a physical law: two bodies cannot occupy the same safety at the same time.

I lifted the telephone, replaced it, and drank. Then I lifted it again, replaced it, and drank again. Cara, I thought bitterly, would have no problem about this. She would save the sailor because he was the immediate one; later she would give all her comfort to our father. But I was not Cara. And my father was very beloved to me.

I was still struggling with this enormity when I heard footsteps coming along the walk. They stopped at my door, and someone knocked sharply. Who? No one knew where I was. No one. Puzzled, I opened the door and saw two men. One was a detective—I knew him, Sergeant Mooney. The other one I'd never seen. Mooney spoke. "Hello, Mr. Kane. This is Detective Pierce. Can we talk for a few minutes?"

I nodded dumbly. They had discovered something. Why else would they come? Oh, my poor father. "Of course, Sergeant. Come in. How did you know I was here?"

Mooney and I took the chairs and Pierce sat on the bed. I offered them a drink and they turned it down. Mooney's serious face made me increasingly certain that they knew about my father's guilt. At least I hadn't been the one to tell them.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked.

"The clerk," Mooney said. "He remembered seeing you at the inquest and he thought it was strange—you coming here and asking for this room."

"Of course," I said. "I should have realized. But then I was so upset that day. I suppose he would have been there, wouldn't he?" I tried to speak calmly, aware now that they *didn't* know about my father. They had come simply because the nosy little man at the desk had called them.

"Why *are* you here?" Mooney asked. He was a big man, ponderous, kind. I'd known him for years. We met at Cara's trial. After the car crash. He was with the Accident Investigation Unit then. He tented his fingers now and peered at me through the aperture. It was a gesture I'd seen him make before. Pierce sat silent on the bed.

"I thought I could understand something about Cara's death if I came here alone." It sounded lame now, even to me. Policemen are very realistic. It's difficult to speak to them about feelings and fancies.

"You know, Mr. Kane," Sergeant Mooney said, "when we got this call I kind of thought it might be you. The clerk didn't remember who you were—just that he'd seen you in court. It was the second

call I got about you. The other one was from the sailor's lawyer. You were there again."

The other detective got up suddenly and moved toward the dresser. He motioned to Mooney and we all stared at the ashtray. "Were you burning something, Mr. Kane?"

I tried to distract them by speaking of my need to see the sailor, to question him. But it was useless. The one called Pierce put the charred curls into a small plastic bag, and Mooney turned to me. "We have several unidentified prints from this room," he told me, "prints that don't belong to your sister or the sailor or the help. We assumed that previous occupants had left them. Do you think some of them are going to turn out to be yours, Mr. Kane?"

I sat down and covered my face. I could see where my bungling was leading. "No, Sergeant, they won't be mine. I may as well tell you. I can see you're going to find out. It was my father. He needs help." I told him the story then, hating myself for telling it. I finished by asking him if the burned envelope could be reconstructed.

Mooney didn't answer. His eyes were curiously opaque; there was something in them I couldn't read. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked. "Who's your family doctor, Mr. Kane? And your lawyer?" Then he launched into a torrent of words, and I knew, incredibly, that he was reading me my rights. It made me wild.

"What's wrong with you? Haven't you been listening? My father killed her—he needs help!"

Sergeant Mooney took me by the arm, gently. "Do you remember when we first met?" he asked. It seemed an odd question under the circumstances. "Do you remember that your sister went to prison for manslaughter? In connection with the death of your father?"

My head began to pain as I tried to figure out what he was up to. Was this lie supposed to shock some additional information out of me? Did he think I was holding back? We went outside, the three of us, and I saw the little man, the clerk standing on the walk. What on earth could be happening? I decided to ask him.

"Pardon me, sir. I wonder if you know anything about the laws of this state concerning vehicular homicide?" My question appeared to unnerve him. His eyes loomed large behind his glasses, his face paled. I shall never forget how he looked standing there as we drove away, hopping, agitated, just like a disabled bird.

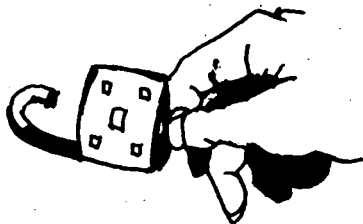
I think of him now as I stare sourly at the doctors. I am so ghastly weary of doctors. That little man is the one who needs a doctor.

These doctors need doctors. They crouch around me like crocodiles, their mouths yawning, their mouths full of insinuations and lying questions. This is the most godawful place I've ever stayed in—worse than a motel.

These people are inordinately interested in personal matters. They would give anything to know, for instance, why I've never married. A gross invasion of my privacy. They also question me closely about the crosses and circles that I pen idly while they talk. They suspect some deep inner meaning—no matter that I tell them it's a common doodle, that my father frequently scribbles it quite unconsciously. One of them tried to tell me that my father never recovered from the accident, that he died years ago. He's in collusion with Sergeant Mooney, I see that now—I see it clearly.

But they are all liars in one way or another. Their mouths are filled with soft cottony lies. I watch the wisps move gently at the back of their throats as they breathe in and out. I'd like to put out my hands and stop them, squeeze off the air. They won't leave me alone, and I need time to sort out my sister's death.

I will never rest until I discover why that sailor killed Cara. She wouldn't have refused him anything. I know that. I'm certain that if I could get out of here, if I could go to the place where she died, sit in that motel room, that I could puzzle it out, that I could find the answer.



James Powell

## Trophy Day at the Chateau Gai

The Ministry of Tourism's reception for Charles Dobbin took place in the tiny Giordano Room of the Winter Palace. After all, the author of *The Lure of New Jersey* and *The Oslo Nobody Knows*, to mention only two of his books, was hardly a travel writer of the first rank.

Dobbin stood in the middle of the room and tried to look accessible. But no one approached him and finally he turned his attention to the ornate ceiling painted by Guido Giordano. The artist had depicted Boniface Tancredi, the founder of the Royal House of San Sebastiano, in the act of stepping full-born from the heart of a Cabbage and bearing in one hand the Sword of Justice and in the other the Sword of Mercy. At his side, stepping equally full-born from the heart of a Rose, was his beautiful consort, Ghislaine of Valence. The motif of the Cabbage and the Rose entwined, the national emblem of the principality, was repeated around the border molding.

"May an admirer introduce himself, Mr. Dobbin?" said a tall lean-faced man in a double-breasted suit. "My name is Alfred Panache." Mr. Panache carried a briefcase and a dove-gray homburg in one hand. Obviously he had just arrived.

"You're very kind," said Dobbin with a polite smile, knowing he had no real admirers, except perhaps his mother, who enjoyed his books or said she did.

"We're all looking forward to your new book on our little principality," said Panache. "Personally, I hope it's something in the style of your *Fun Days and Nights in Labrador*." Then to Dobbin's surprise and delight, Panache launched into a detailed tribute to the book in question, at the conclusion of which he said earnestly, "Mr. Dobbin, could I prevail on you to lecture us on your travels? You see, I am the warden of the Chateau Gai Prison, and all the prisoners are great fans of yours."

"All the prisoners?" said Dobbin, struggling to conceal his pleasure. "But I'm really not much of a public speaker."

"I can't believe that," insisted Panache. "You write with such clarity and strength. And wit," he added with a wink. "I particularly



liked your description of the Labrador Retriever as a 'fetching animal.'"

Dobbin lowered his eyes. "I rather liked that one myself," he said.

A uniformed postman, the only other passenger on the ten-minute trip from the mainland, walked his bicycle down the gangplank ahead of Dobbin, touched his cap to Panache, who was waiting on the jetty, and pedaled off toward the prison gate.

"Delighted you came," said the warden, shaking Dobbin's hand. "As I said, the prisoners will certainly look forward to a Trophy Day that includes a talk by their favorite author."

"I thought I'd recount my misadventures while writing *Sahara Saraband*," said Dobbin. "Sunstroke, getting lost in a particularly noxious corner of the desert called The Devil's Armpit, and a brush with Bedouin tribesmen that cost me a brand-new bicycle and almost my life."

Panache frowned at these words. But Dobbin didn't notice. He was awed by the walls of the Chateau Gai, which rose up from the water's edge to crowd the afternoon sky. "Eleventh Century?" he asked.

"Twelfth," said Panache absently, as they started down the jetty. "Built as a defense against the Moors." His voice fell into the flat patter of a tour guide. "The Chateau Gai received its present name during the Captain-Generalcy. In 1625 when Martin Corbeau, Captain-General of the army of San Sebastiano, converted to Calvinism and drove the dissolute Prince Raoul II into exile, he used the castle to imprison all opponents of his strict, puritan regime—the punster, the epicure, the fashion plate. Often, while the principality slumbered in righteous, God-fearing darkness, the castle blazed with lights and echoed with laughter as elegant men and beautiful ladies danced far into the night. Today the North or 'Black' Tower is famous for its fine collection of instruments of torture. It also contains the cell where the celebrated Man in the Iron Boot lived out his tragic days."

"The Man in the Iron what?" asked Dobbin.

"Legend has it that at the Battle of Lepanto, Didier, eldest son of Prince Waldemir, was betrayed into the hands of the Moors by Lothair, his own younger brother. Years later Didier escaped and returned to San Sebastiano to find Lothair on the throne. But before Didier could reveal himself to the people, Lothair had him imprisoned here. The Iron Boot is supposed to have concealed the sixth toe on the left foot, the mark of the Royal House of San Sebastiano."

The postman cycled by, on his way back to the boat. Panache and Dobbin started up the incline toward the prison gate. The warden smiled. "Some believe the melancholy ghost of the Man in the Iron Boot still clumps our corridors, denied the peace of the grave until the day a prisoner escapes from the Chateau Gai."

"You mean no one ever has escaped?" asked Dobbin.

Panache shook his head. "Though last year the prisoner Pirelli almost left us, riding a hot-air balloon pasted together from the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*, which our library subscribes to because of its fine Travel section. Fortunately a guard on the wall had the presence of mind to shoot the balloon right through the Hammacher Schlemmer ad."

They reached the gate. It was massive oak, studded with iron Cabbages and Rôses. Panache rang a bell and a small window in the gate blinked open. They waited, Dobbin smiling awkwardly at the window. After a minute Panache said, "Perhaps if you'd take your hand out of your pocket, Mr. Dobbin. They may think you're holding a gun on me." Dobbin did as he was told. "Good. Good," approved the warden. "And now, if you'd just raise your arms over your head. Slowly." Dobbin obeyed. A narrow door in the gate clicked open.

Panache and Dobbin stepped through into a dark tunnel at the far end of which, beyond a gate of iron bars, was a sun-filled courtyard. Two guards holstered their pistols and frisked Dobbin. "Security's my great preoccupation," explained Panache apologetically. After the guards had poked through Dobbin's overnight bag, the warden led him to the courtyard where more guards, with clipboards and sweatshirts bearing the name *Chateau Gai Prison*, were officiating as a group of gray-clad prisoners competed in the pole vault. "A healthy mind in a healthy body," remarked Panache.

"Somehow your charges don't look like criminal types," said Dobbin.

"Correct," said Panache proudly. "Not a desperado among them. Our prisoners are all former bureaucrats and politicians." Panache smiled at Dobbin's confusion. "San Sebastiano has two political parties—the Blues and the Pinks," he explained. "Since neither represents anything even vaguely smacking of ideology, corruption in office is always the principal election issue. In the old days, when the Blues, for example, ousted the Pinks from power they would pack the Pinks off to jail in wholesale lots on charges of accepting bribes, misuse of public funds, et cetera, et cetera. And of course

they would free all the Blues who had been jailed on similar charges when the Pinks had come to power."

"A system that jails politicians can't be all bad," said Dobbin.

"True," said Panache. "But in times of turmoil, with governments falling left and right, the heavy traffic of politicians in and out of our prison threatened a breakdown of national life. So our leaders came up with the Scapegoat Compromise: each time the government falls, the ousted party selects a single member to bear the burden of its collective guilt. The one chosen is sentenced to life imprisonment here at the Chateau Gai without hope of pardon or parole.

"But come," said Panache, unlocking a steel door to reveal a flight of steps. "First, if you don't mind, we'll stop by my office for a moment. Then, when you've freshened up, I'll give you a tour of the Chateau Gai."

But Dobbin was still watching the prisoners. "If they're all here for life, why the interest in travel books?" he asked.

Panache shrugged and led the way up the stairs. "Perhaps because I won't allow them to read anything else. While we're on the subject, might I make a suggestion regarding your talk?" Before Dobbin could answer, Panache gave a short cry, staggered, and almost fell. "It's nothing, nothing," he assured Dobbin breathlessly. "I stepped on—on—" He fumbled around in the shadows. "On this," he said bitterly, producing a flashbulb. Cursing politely, he sent the flashbulb bouncing hollowly down the steps and limped upward.

As they reached the top of the stairs an old man in a black cassock stepped out of a doorway where he seemed to have been hiding. He snapped a flash camera to his eye but then lowered it again with an expression of profound disappointment.

Panache muttered darkly under his breath and took Dobbin's arm. "You really must meet Dr. Emile Talon, the prison medical officer," he said hastily. Opening the first door on the right without knocking, Panache pushed Dobbin gently but firmly inside.

At a desk sat a fat purple-faced man with a full mustache who was in the act of raising a water tumbler to his lips. He started and spilled part of the contents on his white jacket. The room suddenly smelled of brandy.

"My dear Talon," said Panache, "excuse me for bursting in on you like this. But I knew you'd want to meet Mr. Dobbin, the famous author." As Talon gave Dobbin a plump hand to shake, footsteps could be heard in the hall. The doctor's watery eyes stared over Dobbin's shoulder until the footsteps had passed away.

"That's only our venerable chaplain, the Abbé Ferox," explained Panache.

Talon nodded. "Let me ask Mr. Dobbin something," he said. "Mr. Dobbin, for years now the Abbé Ferox has been trying to confront the ghost of the Man in the Iron Boot, but always the ghost eludes him. Always the heavy tread is just around the corner or just ahead of him on the stairs. Now you and I, as sophisticated, worldly men, know there is no such thing as a ghost. So if it isn't the Man in the Iron Boot our chaplain hears, who is it?"

"It's no use, Talon," said the warden. "I haven't told Mr. Dobbin your story yet."

"I should have thought you would have by now," said the doctor in a hurt voice. "It's a tragic tale—the kind authors like."

Panache had opened the door a crack. Peering out into the hall he said, "All clear, Mr. Dobbin. Shall we let the doctor get back to his important work?"

Talon finished the brandy in his glass, wiped his mustache, and peered down at the papers on his desk. "Ah, yes," he said. "Here's an interesting fact which perhaps you can use in a book sometime. The average height of our prisoners has increased two inches in the past ten years."

"Don't judge our doctor too severely on that encounter, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache, thumbing through the drawer of a filing cabinet in his office. "He's a better doctor drunk than most doctors are sober. But I'm afraid Abbé Ferox and all his stalking around after the Man in the Iron Boot has put an idea into Talon's head."

Panache drew out a manila folder, skimmed through it, and continued, "There was once a scoundrel named Navarre who seduced Talon's sister and abandoned her with child. He also swindled Talon's father out of the family fortune and drove the old man to suicide. Then one day Navarre collapsed from a massive brain tumor. There was only one surgeon skilled enough to attempt the operation."

"You mean Talon killed this Navarre under the knife?"

Panache shook his head. "No. Talon aspired to one of the greatest human pleasures—to have his enemy's life in his hands, to do everything humanly possible to save it, and yet to have his enemy die. The doctors in attendance say he drove himself to the outermost limits of the surgical art. In fact, only one thing went wrong with

his plan: Navarre survived and is now living in luxury in Switzerland."

"But what is the connection between Navarre and the Man in the Iron Boot?" asked Dobbin.

"Didn't I mention Navarre's clubfoot?" said Panache.

"You mean that Dr. Talon believes Navarre is here?"

"I'm afraid so," said Panache absently. Then he tapped the folder. "If you excuse me I must speak to the doctor about the prisoner Pirelli's record."

Panache left Dobbin to examine the reproduction of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings on the walls. After a moment Dobbin heard new footsteps in the hall. Then the door opened and the man in the cassock stepped quickly inside.

"Mr. Dobbin," he whispered, "I am the Abbé Ferox. I believe that in a matter as important as this I may speak to you without our being formally introduced. I beg you, don't be deceived by Panache. He is an evil man. He is playing a cruel game with the prisoners. He tortures them. He tears them apart."

The Abbé pounded his fist in his hand, triggering the flash mechanism on his camera. Dobbin blinked and shook his head. "A thousand pardons," said the Abbé, fumbling in the folds of his cassock for another flashbulb. "I'm afraid I have a loose connection. But I must be ready at all times to come face to face with a certain tormented specter."

The Abbé tapped his camera significantly. "Then they'll have to believe me about the warden as well." Steps sounded in the hall. "Panache mustn't find us together," whispered the Abbé. Laying a finger on his lips he ducked into a closet, only to pop out again. "Were you ever a Boy Scout?" he asked.

"Yes," said Dobbin, "but—" The Abbé closed the closet door, triggering the flash as he did. The crack under the door glowed with light and the Abbé called some saint by name. A moment later Panache came into the room.

The warden's living room was bright with Oriental rugs and snug with overstuffed chairs and sofas. Heavily barred French doors opened out onto a small balcony that overlooked the courtyard. Dobbin stood watching the prisoners trot in a pack around the base of the wall. From another room Panache's voice could be heard, its cadence patient and soothing, as though speaking to an invalid. Dobbin had dismissed the Abbé Ferox's charges. After all, the man

saw ghosts—or wanted to see them. Nevertheless his encounter with the chaplain had been unsettling. "My wife sends her regrets, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache, closing the door behind him. "She doesn't feel quite up to joining us at the moment."

"I hope it's nothing serious," said Dobbin.

"A heart condition aggravated by deep-seated feelings of anxiety—at least, that's how Dr. Talon would describe it," said Panache. "What he means is that twice my wife almost died, once from shame and once from fear." Panache smiled sadly. "Mr. Dobbin," he said, "picture a certain indolent young man bred to the life of the country squire—late breakfasts, afternoon strolls around the estate, evenings drowsing over a book before the fire. Then one day he meets a beautiful young girl and falls in love. But her father is a frozen-fish baron, a humble squid peddler who hacked and slashed his way to the top of the heap. With such a father how could she love an idler, someone who couldn't make his own way in the world?"

"So the young man changed—at least, I thought I'd changed. With my new father-in-law's backing I made rapid advancement in the Foreign Service. And yet there was a part of me that was still the country squire. Sometimes, as I sat at my desk, my soul would leave my body and roam the countryside with my pack of Riviera Snake Terriers.

"Then came a certain diplomatic dinner in the summer of 1939. In charge of the seating arrangement, I let my mind wander and absently sat the German Ambassador on the Polish Ambassador's left and set the Beluga caviar on the table to the Polish Ambassador's right." Panache shook his head. "A childish mistake. The old Pole was deaf in his left ear, and the German was inordinately fond of caviar. So his 'Pass the Beluga!' fell on a deaf ear. To make a long story short, the next day I was demoted to the Ministry of Justice. My wife, who was away in Paris attending a world conference of women who wanted their husbands to become heads of state, collapsed from a heart attack when she heard the shameful news.

"During my next few years at the Ministry of Justice I strove to crush the dreamer within. And eventually I was appointed warden here. Perhaps you can see why no one must escape from the Chateau Gai, Mr. Dobbin. The disgrace would kill my wife. The doctors say she couldn't survive a third heart attack." Panache picked up his briefcase. "Well, shall we begin our tour?"

"You mentioned two heart attacks," said Dobbin, following him out the door.

"The second was several years ago when she learned that our good friend Raymond Benoit had been chosen as the Scapegoat," said Panache. They had reached the top of another flight of stairs. Panache unlocked a steel door and they stepped out to the sunlit ramparts. "You see," continued the warden, "Benoit is a master of escape, a talent which revealed itself when he and I were members of the Nightshirts, San Sebastiano's Second World War Resistance group. Benoit would let himself be captured and then lead mass escapes from the dreaded Gestapo prison in the Hotel Malatesta—sometimes as many as three or four times a day."

Halfway across the ramparts Panache stopped and nodded down at the prisoners trotting in the yard below. "Simulated cross-country run, free style," he said. "We also have a simulated cross-country run with leg irons, which is more grueling. They're both main events on our Field Day." He shook his head. "The prisoners don't seem to be putting their backs into it, do they? I'm afraid morale's at a low ebb. I was hoping your speech would cheer them up. But I wonder if sandstorms, Bedouins, and The Devil's Armpit would do the trick."

"You've lost me," said Dobbin.

"I rather hoped you'd emphasize the positive side of a travel writer's life—the freedom to go where one pleases, to follow the sun and the migrating birds, to drink deeply of the oneness of man and nature in the great outdoors."

Dobbin turned away. "Considering they're prisoners here for the rest of their lives, mightn't that be rather cruel?" he said.

Panache regarded Dobbin thoughtfully. Just then they were both distracted by a figure on the opposite rampart. It was the Abbé Ferox, holding a pink-and-blue flag—the flag of San Sebastiano—in each hand. Now Dobbin understood the Boy Scout reference, for as they watched, the Abbé began to signal with the flags in semaphore. Letter by letter, the message took shape: "Who groans at night from the Black Tower? Is Madame Panache really alive? Why do the prisoners fear Panache? P.S.: Panache and Talon are thick as thieves."

"Can you read semaphore, Mr. Dobbin?" asked the Warden casually.

"No," said Dobbin, not exactly sure why he lied.

Signaling the end of the message, the Abbé tucked the flags under his arm and scurried off across the other rampart. He was followed a moment by a portly man in a white jacket, walking a bit unsteadily. Dr. Talon.



"A tedious man, the Abbé Ferox," observed Panache . . .

"This is the prison proper," said Panache as they stepped through a tower door. With a loud clang, a sallow-faced guard closed the door behind them and locked it with much rattling of keys. Panache gestured up a staircase. "The Black Tower and the Man in the Iron Boot's cell which is now occupied by Raymond Benoit," he said. "Perhaps we can visit them later."

Dobbin shivered as they started downward. The walls gave off a chill as though the stones had turned to iron. "You will note from now on that doors clang, hinges creak, and the keys are absurdly large," said Panache. "This is to impress the inmates that they are prisoners here, not permanent guests at a luxury hotel, as my predecessor preferred them to believe." Dobbin felt a vague uneasiness as they passed along corridors lit by harsh, caged bulbs, down narrow twists of stairs, and through thick, fat-bolted, heavily locked doors.

The cell block was a row of doors. Through small barred windows, Dobbin could see the occupants, each a study in concentration. Some paced up and down, others stared at the wall, furrowed their brows, or sat with their heads in their hands. Panache nodded at each window with satisfaction. "Those prisoners who aren't competing in the athletic events are having their meditation period," he explained.

A few cells farther on, Panache stopped again and sighed with exasperation. "Now, if we were half blind, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache loudly, "we might mistakenly conclude that the prisoner Stocke is under those covers there. But obviously we are looking at a crude dummy with a hairbrush for hair. Yes, Stocke is up to his old tricks again. He is either hiding under his cot or to one side of the door ready to surprise and overpower the guard. This ruse and its variations are so basic that in my training lecture to new guards I refer to it as Routine Number Two. And if you could overpower a guard, Stocke, what then?" called Panache. "There are other guards and other doors to get through."

"I'd have thought of something," said a sheepish voice close to the cell window.

Panache gave a cynical laugh. "Get back to meditating, Stocke."

"Meditating on what?" asked Dobbin as they moved on.

"Obviously what all prisoners should meditate on," said Panache, unlocking one of the cell doors. Inside, a distinguished-looking prisoner with graying temples leaped to his feet. "Quarterly report time, Pirelli," said Panache, coming in and setting his briefcase on the



tiny cell table. "Do you mind if Mr. Dobbin, the famous author, joins us?"

"Not at all," said Pirelli, plainly grateful for any reason to avoid Panache's gaze. "I enjoyed Mr. Dobbin's *Romany Rambles Through the Republic of Chad* very much," he said.

Panache sat down, pulled the manila folder from his briefcase, and leafed slowly through it, shaking his head with displeasure. "Hardly a record to be proud of, Pirelli," he said at last. Then he turned to Dobbin. "In his first ten years here, Pirelli tried to escape thirty-three times. I think I mentioned the hot-air balloon made out of the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*." Panache looked at the prisoner with admiration. "A good try, Pirelli," he said. "But that was a year ago and you haven't made another escape attempt since. What's wrong?"

Pirelli shrugged and looked at the floor. "If Benoit can't escape from the Chateau Gai, then nobody can," he said.

"But Benoit isn't even trying any more," said Panache. "That's why he's in solitary. Must I take stronger measures with you?" frowned Panache, uncapping his pen. Pirelli squirmed. After a moment Panache sighed and took some photographs from the folder. "I had dinner with your charming daughter and her husband last week," he said, handing the photos over. "Afterwards I took these. A delightful family scene, don't you think?"

Pirelli stared hungrily at the pictures. The warden made no attempt to hurry him except to say, "Little Sara wonders why her grandfather no longer writes that he may visit her soon."

Pirelli finally nodded. "There has to be a way," he said decisively.

Panache closed the folder and stood up. "Good, Pirelli! I'm counting on you. I know you won't let me down."

The Torture Chamber was no less ominous because the thumbcrews, manacles, and pincers for tearing flesh from bones were laid out and labeled in glass cases or that the branding irons were arranged alphabetically in display cabinets. It was still a chamber of horrors. A poker lay among fresh ashes in the massive brazier that dominated the center of the room. Along one wall were a number of what looked like mummy cases arranged by size. "Iron maidens," said Panache, swinging one open on well oiled hinges to reveal the spiky interior. By the solitary window stood the rack, a bed of thick planks with crank-operated drums at the head and foot, and bright new leather straps.

"You're silent, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache.

"I'm a bit confused," said Dobbin cautiously. "You almost sound as if you *want* the prisoners to escape."

"Not at all," said Panache vigorously. "But I do expect them to *try*. After all, I'm responsible for their mental well being as well as their physical. Can a man's mind be healthy if he doesn't want to be free—free to go where he wants to go, be what he wants to be? Man should, after all, either be free or striving to be free. When I first arrived here as warden, I was ashamed, Mr. Dobbin. The inmates had traded their freedom for a mess of pottage—for playing cards in the sun with the guards, for little theater groups and oratorical societies, for singsongs in the refectory on rainy days. I set about to remedy the situation even if it meant—"

"—taking stronger measures?" interrupted Dobbin.

"Even if it meant doing certain things which polite society might consider despicable," said Panache.

Dr. Talon appeared in the doorway. "A preprandial aperitif?" he asked thickly. Dobbin was happy to accept, eager to leave a room he found oppressive. To his disappointment Talon swung open the largest Iron Maiden to reveal a well stocked bar.

"Dr. Talon spends a great deal of time here," explained Panache. "He is the curator, so to speak, of our little collection."

Talon nodded. He poured the drinks, drained his own in a single draught, and poured himself another. "Perhaps Mr. Dobbin finds it strange that a doctor should be interested in instruments of torture," he said.

"Opposites attract," said Dobbin with an uneasy smile.

"Even more than that," said Talon, "opposites become one another. The hunter becomes the hunted. The warden becomes the prisoner. The surgeon becomes the cutthroat." Talon tapped one of the display cases. "You know, as morbid as their trade was, the torturers often possessed a certain wry humor. These silver thumbscrews, for example, were only used when the victim was of nobility. They are set with sardonyx, a stone which was supposed to ward off pain. Just get up here on the rack, Mr. Dobbin, and I'll show you something else."

Dobbin laughed nervously, as though the doctor had made a very small joke. Both Talon and Panache smiled. Smiles of menace? Dobbin wasn't sure. But all of a sudden they seemed to be crowding him. "Please, Mr. Dobbin," said Panache, gesturing at the rack, "our doctor is so proud when he can show off the collection."

Dobbin sat on the edge of the rack and swung his feet up, not wanting to look the fool by refusing, not wanting to shatter the thin layer of politeness for fear of what he might find beneath. Quickly and expertly Talon buckled a strap around each ankle. "I've set this as if you were five centimeters taller than you actually are," he said, raising Dobbin's wrists up over his head and buckling them into the straps as well. "That way I can make my point without causing you any discomfort."

Talon tossed off another drink and then threw his weight against the crank at the head of the rack. Cogs clacked into place and Dobbin felt himself being pulled back and—because of the tilt of the rack—upward. "Now look straight out the window and tell me what you see," said Talon.

"Blue sky," said Dobbin, wishing he were somewhere else.

"Good," said Talon, like an approving optometrist.

A half crank more and the slack in the ankle straps had disappeared. Dobbin laughed nervously. "I hope this isn't why your prisoners are averaging two inches taller," he said.

Panache smiled. Talon turned the crank. "What do you see now?" he asked.

"The dome of the Casino is a bit to the left," said Dobbin, feeling his body draw tense.

"Good," said Talon, returning to the crank.

Dobbin was beginning to have trouble breathing. Panache leaned over him. "Mr. Dobbin," he said quietly, "I've been meaning to ask you to reconsider the theme of your lecture."

"What do you see now?" said Talon.

"The neon sign," gasped Dobbin. "The one on the roof of the Hotel Adalbert I, the one that says: *Eat Momwráth Cheese*."

Talon muttered, "Good," and to Dobbin's relief he stopped cranking. "Centuries ago, before that sign was built, the victim on the rack was given a perfect view of the statue of Blind Justice on top of the Courthouse in those brief seconds just before he was torn limb from limb. Of course, today what do you see?" added Talon bitterly. "*Eat Momwrath Cheese!* It's hardly the same thing. Today there is no justice!" Talon emphasized this last remark by giving the crank a quarter turn. "Today the good are victimized and the evil limp the world as free men." The crank turned.

Dobbin squirmed. He could see the turrets of the Winter Palace now, where, on the ceiling of the Giordano Room, Boniface Tancredi and his beautiful consort were popping out of their respective Cab-

bage and Rose in much the same way Dobbin imagined his bones were soon going to pop out of their sockets. Panache was leaning over him. "About your lecture, Mr. Dobbin."

"We'll do it your way," said Dobbin breathlessly.

"Thank you," said the warden gratefully. He straightened up and frowned. "My dear doctor, you forget yourself," he said. "You're making Mr. Dobbin uncomfortable."

Talon stopped cranking and looked around with wild bewildered eyes. "He was here," he said. "Navarre was here and I had him on the rack. But even then there was no justice, only Momwrath Cheese." With a sigh the doctor reversed the crank and the straps at Dobbin's wrists and ankles went slack.

Panache tapped his knife on the water glass. The four long tables of prisoners with after-dinner cigars fell silent. "Now, gentlemen," said Panache, "we reach that point in the evening I know you've all been waiting for—the presentation of the awards." But before he could continue, the Abbé Ferox had risen in his place. He had spent the entire meal trying to send messages to Dobbin by tapping against his plate—one tap for A, two for B, and so on. It was a tedious message, full of Y's and Z's and X's, and Dobbin, whose mind was still in a turmoil from his experience on the rack, had closed his ears and gulped his wine. Now the Abbé had risen and was clearing his throat. Panache frowned and then said wearily, "But first our chaplain will say grace after meals." The prisoners rose and bowed their heads.

"Heavenly father," droned the Abbé, "we thank you for this food which has strengthened our bodies. We thank you for the strength you have given our spirits as well, the strength to know there can be no real escape this side of the grave and to endure with happy resignation the terror and intimidation and other strong measures heaped on our heads by our lawful superiors.

"Send us, we pray, a man of courage who can return to the mainland and tell our story to Monsieur Fauret—that's F-A-U-R-E-T—the Inspector of Prisons, Room 402 in the Palais de Justice. Send us a man who can stop this inhuman game that certain people are forcing us to play for their own personal amusement. Send us a man who can discover why the warden will not let your humble servant visit his wife who—"

The prisoners were glancing at one another. One had even picked up his cigar and was puffing on it uneasily. The chaplain stopped

and looked up. "If you please, prisoner Gaspard," he scolded, "we are at prayer." When Gaspard had put down his cigar, the chaplain continued: "—his wife, who I have every reason to believe has been done away with. Amen." Defying Panache with a look, the Abbé stalked out of the dining hall.

Panache launched at once into the presentation of the athletic awards until nothing remained but a large bronze trophy of a man raising a broken manacle triumphantly over his head.

"The Chateau Gai Freedom Trophy," announced Panache, "is awarded annually to the prisoner who makes the most imaginative escape attempt. This year's winner, though plagued by certain elements of the tragicomical—" A few snickers broke out among the prisoners. Panache furrowed his brow and continued severely: "—was not unworthy of the high level of escape attempts of which we at the Chateau Gai may be justly proud. I am speaking, of course, of the prisoner Robinet."

A dignified little man rose amid a mixture of applause and suppressed laughter. Blushing, but with his head held high, Robinet approached the main table.

Robinet had manufactured a complete guard's uniform from cardboard, paper bags, and some Easter-egg dye left over from the annual Easter-egg hunts staged by Panache's predecessor. He then attempted to march out of the prison with a contingent of off-duty guards returning to the mainland. Unfortunately, he was caught in a cloudburst halfway across the courtyard. His cap came unstuck, his puttees unraveled, and his paper jacket and trousers literally disintegrated. He marched up to the inner gate naked and blue all over from the Easter-egg dye. In desperation, he tried to bluff his way through by waving a pistol carved from soap but it popped right out of his hand. He dove for the gun but it popped out of his hand again. And again. And again.

The thought of a sobbing blue man crawling around on his hands and knees in the pouring rain trying to snatch a soap gun was just too much for the prisoners. The warden glowered from table to table, trying to silence the growing laughter. There were tears of shame in the corners of Robinet's eyes as he accepted the trophy and carried it back to his seat.

Furious, Panache pounded his fist until the prisoners fell silent. "At least Robinet *tried!*" shouted Panache. "That's more than I can say for the rest of you, who seem to have reverted to the miserable

condition in which I found you. My predecessor was not a warden. He was a gardener—and you were his vegetables!”

Panache stopped abruptly, struggling to control himself. Calm at last, he said, “Tonight we are fortunate to have with us a man who has traveled footloose and fancy-free throughout this wide world of ours. May his words be an inspiration to you all. Mr. Charles Dobbin.”

Dobbin began with misgivings, not the least of which was the fact that he had discarded his Sahara misadventures and based his talk on the least successful of his books, *By Dugout and Litter Through the Rainforests of the Upper Amazon*. But soon he was caught up in his own story, perhaps because at that moment he would have given anything to be back up the Amazon, far beyond the Chateau Gai.

Suddenly the prisoner Robinet gave an incoherent shout, broke away from his table, and threw himself, butting and clawing, against the wall. Two guards hurried over, gently restrained the sobbing little man, and led him from the hall. Dobbin tried to continue, but the spell was broken. The prisoners muttered among themselves and shook their heads at each other. Dobbin concluded his talk abruptly. At a signal from Panache, the dejected prisoners were led back to their cells.

Panache toyed with the stem of his wine glass. “An excellent talk, Mr. Dobbin,” he said sadly. “But, alas, Robinet undid all the good, poor fellow. He’s another reason for the shortage of escape attempts this year. The prisoners are afraid of making fools of themselves as he did. And yet—” Panache thought for a moment. “And yet, mustn’t a man try to be free even if it means sacrificing the esteem of others?” He answered his own question with a crisp nod. “Yes, he must. Come, Mr. Dobbin. Drastic situations require drastic measures.”

Dobbin followed the warden, still refusing to admit his fears. The cell of the Man in the Iron Boot was on the floor above the Torture Chamber. Raymond Benoit, a robust-looking man in his fifties, was stretched out on the bed with his hands behind his head.

“My dear Alfred,” the prisoner said, sitting up and placing his feet on the floor, “how nice of you to come. For a prisoner in solitary confinement I certainly have enough visitors. If it isn’t the Abbé Ferox asking me if I’ve seen or heard his foot-dragging ghost it’s the good doctor come to measure my height or carry on about that rascal Navarre.”

Panache nodded pleasantly. “I’ve brought you some reading mat-

ter, Raymond," he said, holding up a book. "It's called *The Eyes of Darkness: The Posthumous Memoirs of Aglai, Duchess of Polenta*."

Benoit's smile faded. "Don't presume on our friendship, Alfred," he warned.

"But you feature so prominently in it," said Panache, leafing through the pages.

"No," said Benoit sharply.

"Take this entry, for example," said Panache, "the one dated May 15, 1964: 'Blithe steps on the stairs, Benoit's quick knock, and my dear friend arrives for his daily visit. As always, Bouchard has preceded him—Bouchard whom I always imagine dressed in black, sitting silent and erect in whatever shadow he can find. Both Bouchard and Benoit wear the Cabbage of the Blues in their lapels. But apart from politics, how completely different they are! Benoit is all light and sound. His shoe leather creaks like a galley, his linen is a walk in the park in the snow, his newspaper crackles in his hands like a brushfire. Bouchard is a stone wall—strong, protecting, always the same.

"But Benoit, with his anecdotes and his latest gossip from the Café Gavotte where he lunches without fail, is my window on life. Or was, for after today he will not come again. He had been reading the newspaper aloud. Guided by his voice, I saw the front page—headlines, articles, pictures—in my mind's eye. But when he tried to move on to page two I stopped him. 'You've skipped something,' I said. He insisted he had not. 'Come, my friend,' I said. 'You are my eyes. Do my own eyes deceive me?'

"And so he read the missing news item: Raymond Benoit, Deputy Minister of Cultural Affairs in the outgoing Blue administration, had been indicted for misappropriation of public funds. 'Benoit, the Scapegoat?' I laughed. 'Impossible. You have no enemies, and you have powerful friends.' 'One makes enemies, one loses friends,' said Benoit. Then I realized it wasn't a joke. 'Bouchard,' I said, 'surely you or your father, the Senator, can—' But Benoit interrupted my plea. 'There's nothing anyone can do,' he assured me.

"And so Benoit left and for me it was like going blind a second time. Bouchard, my wall without windows, remained. He asked me to play for him and in my sadness I did, knowing that as the piano filled the room he would close his eyes and join me in my blindness. And yet—'

"Why are you doing this, Alfred?" rasped Benoit. "After all, she has been dead for three years now."



"But Bouchard is still alive," said Panache. "If you thought about it long enough, you might come to hate him for putting you here."

"I was his friend," said Benoit. "If he loved her enough to put me here, I hold no grudge. And if I didn't accuse him, it was because with me gone she would need someone she could trust. Is there really any point of my thinking about it?"

"If you did, perhaps you'd want to escape and have your revenge," said Panache.

"So that's all this is," Benoit said contemptuously, "another of your little pep talks." He shook his head emphatically. "I don't hate Bouchard!"

"Perhaps if I were to come here every day and read you a bit from this book—"

"I wouldn't listen," insisted Benoit.

"I think you would," said Panache. "And in time you'd come to hate Bouchard. He's all through the book, you know, sitting in the shadows like Death personified."

"We were like two men who loved the same woman," said Benoit angrily. "There wasn't any room for hatred between us. She'd never have allowed it." Benoit paused to show he was choosing his words with care. "Alfred," he said, "before I'd let you destroy that friendship I'd destroy you." He gestured significantly at the stones of the Chateau Gai.

Panache bowed as if he understood. He signaled through the window to the guard who unlocked the cell door.

As they moved on, the warden said, "For your information, Mr. Dobbin, the strongest measure I ever take is simply to give the prisoners an 'unsatisfactory' deportment rating in their files." Dobbin's silence spoke disbelief. Panache shrugged. "I can see you don't understand the bureaucratic mind," he said. "For the bureaucrat, life is short, but files are long. And once there, an 'unsatisfactory' in one's file can never be removed. Three thousand years from now their peers, the bureaucrats of the future, can open that file and read it."

All of a sudden Dobbin believed him.

Panache and Dobbin sat on a balcony of the warden's apartment with the brandy decanter between them. Below, the exercise yard was a pool of light at the bottom of the black night sky. A double line of prisoners marched into the yard carrying folding chairs, while above them, on the roof of the prison proper, guards were lowering



the large white screen. Other guards stood in twos and threes against the walls and watched as the prisoners began to arrange their chairs in a tight square.

"No trophy day would be complete without a movie," said Panache, a bit sadly. He had been downcast since their visit to Benoit, as though ashamed of what had taken place.

"A pity Madame Panache doesn't feel up to joining us," said Dobbin, anxious to show he had dismissed all the chaplain's charges.

It was time for the movie to begin. The floodlights on the walls blinked off. Searchlights on each of the towers took their places and roved back and forth across the yard. The movie was set on Death Row and starred Humphrey Bogart in the role of the tough, tight-lipped killer. The cast also included the wise old convict, the country boy sentenced to death for a crime of passion, the Negro prisoner who sang spirituals, the brutal guard, the guard with a heart of gold, the ferret-faced informer, the ineffectual chaplain, and the harassed warden. As it happened, both Panache and Dobbin had seen the picture before. They drank and chatted quietly to themselves. When Bogart tried to choke the brutal guard against the bars and the audience broke into a cheer, Panache sighed and said, "You know, Mr. Dobbin, I sometimes wonder if human freedom is really worth it. It would be such an inspiration to others if Benoit would try to escape."

Meanwhile it was night and raining on the screen and Bogart crouched in the shadows of the prison yard. Somewhere a siren announced his escape. Searchlights darted everywhere, probing for him in the darkness. And the searchlights of the Chateau Gai moved among the spellbound prisoners, making everything one with the screen.

Suddenly another siren, piercing and near, split the darkness and an electric bell began to clang throughout the Chateau Gai. Panache sat up rigidly in his chair for a moment and then dashed inside. The telephone rang just before he reached it. The floodlights had come on again. The prisoners stood up, blinking and confused, as more guards ran out into the yard, pulling on their coats as they came. Panache walked back out onto the balcony. His face reflected no emotion at all. "Benoit is not in his cell," he announced.

The guard stared down at the pattern in the Oriental rug. "About a half an hour after you left, sir, I looked in on the prisoner Benoit," he said. "He was in bed with the covers up over his head."

"You fell for Routine Number Two!" shouted Panache.

"I beg the warden's pardon, but I did not," said the guard. "The hair was quite obviously a hairbrush. Still, I knew how pleased you'd be that Benoit was at least trying to escape. I called through the window and told him as much. But he did not answer. A bit put out that he would try to deceive me with such a rudimentary trick, I opened the cell door—cautiously, to be sure, and ever mindful of your excellent instructions. He was neither to the left nor to the right of the door."

"Then he was under the bed," said Panache impatiently.

The guard nodded. "In fact, I could see a bit of his trousers," he said. "And getting down on all fours I stuck my head under the bed. 'Come out, prisoner Benoit,' I demanded. That's when I discovered the trouser leg under the bed was empty. In that same instant someone moved on the bed above me and a foot planted itself on my neck. Your excellent instructions notwithstanding, Warden, I had to allow myself to be disarmed and bound hand and foot."

"You mean to tell me that Benoit was hiding under the covers with a hairbrush on his head?" demanded Panache.

The guard nodded. "He took my key, even though I told him it would do no good," he said. "He went out into the hall and very deliberately he forced his foot down into my wastepaper basket. 'Give it up, prisoner Benoit,' I called. 'You can't escape from the Chateau Gai without your pants and with your foot stuck in a tin wastepaper basket.'"

"He smiled apologetically and put a gag in my mouth. Then, much to my surprise, he started clumping up and down the hall. Every now and then he'd stop and listen for moment and then he'd start clumping all over again. Suddenly I heard another voice from the other side of the door. It was our venerable chaplain, the Abbé Ferox.

" 'I'm coming, I'm coming, my ghostly friend,' the Abbé shouted. 'Is it really you at last, your highness?' Or words to that effect. Suddenly I heard the chaplain calling on the saints. 'Wait right there, your highness,' he pleaded. 'Please wait right there. I'll be right back.' But Benoit didn't wait. A moment later I heard him turn the key in the lock and clump out of earshot down the stairs."

"I think I can take up the story," muttered Dr. Talon sheepishly. "I must have dozed. Suddenly the Abbé Ferox was pounding on the door of the Torture Chamber, wild-eyed with excitement. Did I happen to have any spare flashbulbs? I told him I most certainly did not and he dashed off downstairs. A moment later I heard this clump,

clump coming down from the floor above. I was confused. Could it be—? I struggled to see through the window.

"'Navarre,' I whispered. More clumping. 'Navarre, is that you?' The clumping stopped. 'Yes, it's me, Emile,' came the voice; 'open up.' Why did I unlock the door? It couldn't have been Navarre. We were hardly on a first-name basis. But I did. Benoit slipped into the room: Very gently but very firmly he pushed me back into my chair. Then he mulled me another tankard of port.

"I told him I'd thought he was Navarre and of all the terrible things Navarre had done to my family. But I could tell he wasn't listening. He was just standing there, looking round the room and very nervously running his fingers through his hair. I remember commenting that it was strange for him to have a wastepaper basket on his foot. But after all, these are topsy-turvy times we live in. The innocent are punished and the guilty live in luxury—"

"Go on," said Panache impatiently.

"In any event," said the doctor, "the next thing I knew he had broken into the display cases and was hammering the manacles and leg irons into a long chain, which he then proceeded to thread through the bars in the window and then back inside again. Then he wrapped the chain around one of the drums on the rack. He cranked the rack until it tore the bars out of the window."

"All right," insisted Panache. "But it was still a good seventy feet to the water below."

"There were more manacles, more leg irons," said Talon. "He linked them all together and then he dropped the last thirty feet into the water. Personally, I find it ironic that he used the instruments of imprisonment and torture to make his escape."

"Escape?" said a woman's voice in the doorway. "What's this about escape?"

"Raymond Benoit has escaped from the Chateau Gai, my dear," said Panache, without turning to face the pale woman standing there in a yellow nightgown. The woman swayed and fell forward. "Doctor," said Panache, "if you'll take care of your patient, I'll notify the authorities ashore."

On deck of the small mailboat, the mainland was growing larger through the early-morning mist. Panache and Dobbin stood in the bow, sharing a flask of brandy which Dr. Talon had pressed on them before staggering off in pursuit of Navarre, who, the doctor insisted,

was responsible for everything—for the death of Madame Panache, the warden's dismissal, everything.

"Of course, until my hearing I'm only suspended," said Panache, passing the flask to Dobbin with a polite if slightly crooked smile—the drinking, which had started as a necessary comfort during the raw crossing, had by now become a pleasure. Panache shook his head. "Alfred Panache," he said, "the first warden to allow a prisoner to escape from the Chateau Gai."

"I'm sorry," said Dobbin, after a long swallow.

"Ah, my friend," said Panache, staring down into the cold fast-flowing waters, "you shouldn't feel sorry for a man who has just enjoyed one of the greatest of human pleasures. Remember? We talked about that. To have your enemy's life in your hands, to do everything in your power to save it and yet have her die. I dare anyone to say I haven't done my duty. Could any husband have been more solicitous? Could any warden have been more conscientious?"

Dobbin's voice was husky. "Then you knew all the time that someone would escape?"

"It was inevitable," said Panache. "I have too much respect for man's desire to be free to have believed otherwise."

Dobbin thought for a moment. "And now the prisoner Panache is free as well," he said.

Panache nodded. "It's been a great night for escapes," he said. "My wife escapes this vale of tears, the Man in the Iron Boot escapes the Abbé Ferox, Benoit escapes the Chateau Gai, and I escape from twenty years of trying to live someone else's life."

"What now?" asked Dobbin.

"Who knows?" said Panache. "You should always be a bit nervous when you get what you want." He gestured to port. "See those rocks over there? They're called The Three Bishops. Back in the days when the Norse longboats terrorized this coast, three holy men are supposed to have prayed to be changed into rocks and to shipwreck the approaching raiders. Their prayers were granted. But at the last minute the Vikings decided to bypass San Sebastiano."

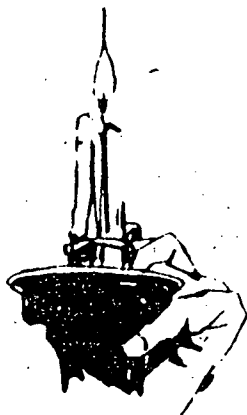
In fact, the rocks did resemble mitred heads shrouded in gray water and early-morning mist and attended by a bobbing bell-buoy. But Dobbin saw something else in the water—a head and shoulders, arms clinging to one of the rocks. It was Benoit. The escaped prisoner stared at the boat defiantly, too tired or too proud to hide. "Look!" Before Dobbin could stop himself the word was out.

Panache was examining the starboard horizon. He didn't turn.

"I remember it was in a sea such as this," he said, "that Benoit swam well out beyond the Chateau Gai to rescue some Nightshirts from the German prison ship, *Shutzmark*."

"Was his foot stuck in a wastepaper basket?" asked Dobbin.

Panache continued to stare to starboard. Then he smiled and, as if in answer to Dobbin's question, said, "Have you ever been to the Café Gavotte, Mr. Dobbin? Let's have lunch there this afternoon. They say the cordial atmosphere is quite conducive to smoothing over small differences and restoring damaged friendships."



## Meeting in the Park

Strange disheveled women who had the air of witches sat around the table in Mrs. Cleasant's drawing room. One of them, a notable medium, seemed to be making some sort of divination with a pack of Tarot cards. Later on, when it got dark, they would go on to table-turning. The aim was to raise up the spirit of Mr. Cleasant, one year dead, and also, Peter thought with anger and disgust, to frighten Lisa out of her wits.

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Cleasant when Lisa came back with her coat on.

Peter answered for her. "I'm taking her for a walk in Holland Park, and then we'll have a meal somewhere."

"Holland Park?" said the medium. If a corpse could have spoken it would have had a voice like hers. "Take care, be watchful. That place has a reputation."

The witch women looked at her expectantly, but the medium returned to her Tarot and was eyeing the Empress which she had brought within an inch or two of her long nose. Peter was sickened by the lot of them. Six months to go, he thought, and he'd take Lisa out of this—this coven.

It was a Sunday afternoon in spring, and the air in the park was fresh and clean, almost like country air. Peter drew in great gulps of it, cleansing himself of the atmosphere of that drawing room.

He wished Lisa would unwind, be less nervous and strung-up. The hand he wasn't holding kept going up to the charm she wore on a chain round her neck or straying out to knock on wood as they passed a bench.

Suddenly she said, "What did that woman mean about the park's reputation?"

"Some occult rubbish. How should I know? I hate that sort of thing."

"So do I," she said, "but I'm afraid of it."

"When we're married you'll never have to have any more to do with it. I'll see to that. God, I wish we could get married now or that you'd come and live with me till we can."

"I can't marry you till I'm eighteen without Mummy's permission, and if I live with you they'll make me a ward of court."

"Surely not, Lisa."

"Anyway, there's only six months to wait. It's hard for me, too. Don't you think I'd rather live with you than with Mummy?"

The childish rejoinder made him smile. "Come on, try and look a bit more cheerful," he said, "I want to take your photograph. If I can't have you, I'll have your picture."

They had reached a sunny open space where he sat her on a log and told her to smile. He got the camera out of its case. "Don't look at those people, darling. Look at me."

It was a pity the man and the girl had chosen that moment to sit down on the wooden seat.

"Lisa!" he said sharply, and then he wished he hadn't, for her face crumpled with distress. He went up to her. "What's the matter, Lisa?"

"Look at that girl," she said.

"All right. What about her?"

"She's exactly like me. She's my double."

"Nonsense! What makes you say that? Her hair's the same color and you're about the same build, but apart from that there's no resemblance. She's years older than you and she's—"

"Peter, you must see it! She could be my twin. Look, the man with her has noticed. He looked at me and said something to her and then they both looked."

Peter couldn't see more than a superficial similarity. "Well, supposing she were your double, which I don't for a moment admit, so what? Why get in such a state about it?"

"Don't you know about doubles? Don't you know that if you see your double, you're seeing your own death, that you will die within the year?"

"Oh, Lisa, come on! I never heard anything so foolish. This is more rubbish you've picked up from those crazy old witches. It's just sick superstition."

But nothing he could say calmed her. Her face had grown white and her eyes troubled. Worried for her rather than angry, he put out his hand and helped her to her feet. She leaned against him, trembling, and he saw she was clutching her amulet.

"Let's go," he said. "We'll find another place to take your picture. Don't look at her if it upsets you. Forget her."

When they had gone off along the path, the man on the seat said

to his companion, "Couldn't you really see that girl was the image of you?"

"I've already told you, no."

"Of course you look a good deal older and harder, I'll give you that."

"Thank you."

"But you're almost her double. Take away a dozen years and a dozen love affairs, and you'd *be* her double."

"Stephen, if you're trying to start another row, just say so and I'll go home."

"I'm not starting anything. I'm fascinated by an extraordinary phenomenon. Holland Park's known to be a strange place. There's a legend you can see your own double here."

"I never heard that."

"Nevertheless, my dear Zoe, it is so. 'The Magus, Zoroaster, my dead child, / Saw his own image walking in the garden.'"

"Who said that?"

"Shelley. Superstition has it that if you see your own image you will die within the year."

She turned slowly to look at him. "Do you want me to die within the year, Stephen?"

He laughed. "Oh, you won't die. You didn't see her, she saw you. And it frightened her. He was taking her photograph, did you see? I wish I'd asked him to take one of you two together. Why don't we see if we can catch up with them?"

"You know, you have a sick imagination."

"No, only a healthy curiosity. Come along now, if we walk fast we'll catch them at the gate."

"If it amuses you," said Zoe.

Peter and Lisa didn't see the other couple approaching. They were walking with their arms round each other, and Peter had managed to distract her from the subject of her double by talking of their wedding plans. At the northern gate someone behind him called out, "Excuse me!" and he turned to see the man who had been sitting on the seat.

"Yes?" Peter said rather stiffly.

"I expect you'll think this is frightful cheek, but I saw you back there and I was absolutely—well, struck by the likeness between my girl friend and the young lady with you. There is a terrific likeness, isn't there?"

"I don't see it," said Peter, not daring to look at Lisa. What a



beastly thing to happen! He felt dismay. "Frankly, I don't see any resemblance at all."

"Oh, but you *must*. Look, what I want is for you to do me an enormous favor and take a picture of them together. Will you? Do say you will."

Peter was about to refuse, and not politely, when Lisa said, "Why not? Of course he will. It's such a funny coincidence, we ought to have a record of it."

"Good girl! We'd better introduce ourselves, then, hadn't we? I'm Stephen Davidson and this is Zoe Conti."

"Lisa Cleasant and Peter Milton," said Peter, still half stunned by Lisa's warm response.

"Hello, Lisa and Peter. Lovely to know you. Now you two girls go and stand over there in that spot of sunshine."

So Peter took the photograph and said he'd send Stephen and Zoe a print when the film was developed. She gave him the address of the flat she and Stephen shared and he noted it was in the next street but one to his. They might have walked there together, which was what Stephen, remarking on this second coincidence, seemed to want. But seeing the tense strained look in Lisa's eyes, Peter refused, and they separated on Holland Park Avenue.

"You didn't mind about not going with them, did you?" said Lisa.

"Of course not. I'd rather be alone with you."

"I'm glad," she said, and then, "I did it for you."

He understood. She had done it for him, to prove to him she could conquer her superstitious terrors. For his sake, because he wanted it, she would try. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

She leaned against him. He could feel her heart beating. "I won't tell anyone else about it," she said, and he knew she meant her mother and the witch women.

When the film was developed he didn't show it to her. He would send Zoe and Stephen their print and that would end the whole incident. But when he was putting it into an envelope, he realized he would have to write a covering note, which was a bore as he didn't like writing letters. Besides, if he was going to take it to the post, he might as well take it to their home. And one evening he did.

He had no intention of going in. But as he was slipping the envelope into the letter box, Zoe appeared behind him on the steps.

"Come in and have a drink."

He couldn't think of an excuse, so he accepted. She led him up two flights of stairs, looking at the photograph as she went.

"So much for this supposed fantastic likeness," she said. "Could you ever see it?"

Peter said he couldn't, wondering how Lisa could have been so silly as to fancy she had seen her double in this woman of thirty, who tonight had a drawn and haggard look. "It was mostly in your friend's imagination," he said as they entered the flat. "We'll see what he says about it now."

For a moment she didn't answer. When her reply came it was brusque. "He's left me."

Peter was embarrassed. "I'm sorry." He looked into her face, at the eyes whose dark sockets were like bruises. "Are you very unhappy?"

"I won't take an overdose, if that's what you mean. We'd been together for four years. It's hard to take. But I won't bore you with it. Let's talk about something else."

Peter had only meant to stay a few minutes, but the minutes grew into an hour, and when Zoe said she was going to cook her dinner and would he stay and have it with her, he agreed.

She was interesting to talk to. She was a music therapist, and she talked about her work and played records. When they had finished their meal, a simple but excellent one, she reverted to her own private life and told him something of her relationship with Stephen. But she spoke without self-pity. And she could listen as well as talk.

It meant something to him to be able to confide in a mature well balanced woman who heard him out without interruption while he spoke of himself and Lisa—how they were going to be married when she was eighteen and when she would inherit half of her dead father's fortune. Not, he said, that the money had really anything to do with it. He'd have preferred her to be penniless. All he wanted was to get her away from that unhealthy atmosphere of dabbling with the occult, from that cloistral home where she was sheltered yet corrupted.

"What is she afraid of?" asked Zoe when he told her about the wood-touching and the indispensable amulet.

He shrugged. "Of fate? Of some avenging fury that will resent her happiness?"

"Or of loss," said Zoe. "She lost her father. Perhaps she's afraid of losing you."

"That's the last thing she need be afraid of," he said.

It was midnight before he left. The next day he meant to tell Lisa where he had been. There were no secrets between them. But Lisa was nervous and uneasy—she and Mrs. Cleasant had been to a spiritualist meeting—and he thought it unwise to raise once more a subject that was better forgotten. So he said nothing. After all, he would never see Zoe again.

But a month or so later, a month in which he and Lisa had been happy and tranquil together, he met the older girl by chance in the Portobello Road. While they talked, it occurred to him that he had eaten a meal in her flat and that he owed her dinner. He and Lisa would take her out to dinner.

In her present mood Lisa would like that, and it would be good for her to see, after the lapse of time, how her superstitiousness had led her into error. He put the invitation to Zoe, who hesitated, then accepted when he explained it would be a threesome. Dinner, then, in a fortnight's time, and he and Lisa would call for her.

"I met that girl Zoe and asked her to have dinner with us. All right with you?"

The frightened-child look came back into Lisa's face.

"Oh, no, Peter! I thought you understood. I don't ever want to see her again."

"But why not? You've seen the photograph, you've seen how silly those ideas of yours were. And Stephen won't be there. I know you didn't like him and neither did I. But they're not together any more. He's left her."

She shivered. "Let's not get to know her, Peter."

"I've invited her," he said. "I can't go back on that now."

When the evening came, Zoe appeared at her door in a long gown, her hair dressed on top of her head. She looked majestic, mysteriously changed.

"Where's Lisa?" she asked.

"She couldn't come. She and her mother are going on holiday to Greece at the end of the week and she's busy packing."

Part of this was true. He said it confidently, as if it were wholly true. He couldn't take his eyes off the new transformed Zoe, and he was glad he had reserved a table in an exclusive restaurant.

In the soft lamplight her youth came back to her. And for the first time he was aware of the likeness between her and Lisa. The older and the younger sister, by a trickery of light and cosmetics and maybe of his own wistful imagination, had come together in years and become twins.

It might have been his Lisa who spoke to him across the table, across the silver and glass and the single rose in a vase, but a Lisa whom life and experience had matured. Never could Lisa have talked like this—of books and music and travel—or listened to him so responsively or advised with such wisdom. He was sorry when the evening came to an end and he left her at her door.

Lisa seemed to have forgotten his engagement to dine with Zoe. She didn't mention it, so he didn't either. On the following morning she was to leave with her mother for the month's holiday the doctor had recommended for Mrs. Cleasant's health.

"I wish I wasn't going," she said to Peter. "You don't know how much I'll miss you."

"Won't I miss you?"

"Take care of yourself. I'll worry in case anything happens to you. You mustn't laugh, but when my father was alive and went away from us, I used to listen to the news four or five times a day in case there was a plane crash or a train wreck."

"You're the one that's going away, Lisa."

"It comes to the same thing." She put up her hand to the charm she wore. "I've got this, but you—would you take my four-leaf clover if I gave it to you?"

"I thought you'd given up all that nonsense," he said, and his disappointment in her almost spoiled their farewells. She kissed him goodbye with a kind of passionate sadness.

"Write to me," she said. "I'll write to you every day."

Her letters started coming at the end of the first week. They were the first he had ever had from her and they were like school essays written by a geography student, with love messages for the class teacher inserted here and there. They left him unsatisfied, a little peevish. He was lonely without her, but afraid of the image of her he carried with him.

He needed to talk it over and after a few days of indecision he telephoned Zoe. Ten minutes later he was in her flat, drinking her coffee and listening to her music. To be with her was a greater comfort than he had thought possible, for in the turn of her head, in the certain way she had of smiling, in the way her hair grew from a widow's peak on her forehead, he caught glimpses of Lisa.

And yet on that occasion he said nothing of his fears but, "I can't understand why I thought you and Lisa weren't alike."

"I didn't see it."

"It's almost overpowering. It's uncanny."

She smiled. "If it helps you to come and see me to get through the time while she's away, that's all right with me, Peter. I can understand that I remind you of her and that it makes things easier for you."

"It isn't only that," he said. "You mustn't think it's only that."

She said no more. It wasn't her way to probe, to hold inquisitions, or to set an egotistical value on herself. But the next time they were together he explained without being asked, and his explanation was appalling to him, the words more powerful and revealing than the thoughts from which they had sprung.

"It isn't true you remind me of Lisa. That's not it. It's that I see in you what she *might* become, only she never will."

"Who would want to be like me?"

"Everyone. Every young girl. Because you're what a woman should be, Zoe, clever and sane and kind and self-reliant and—beautiful."

"And if that's true," she said lightly, "though I disagree, why shouldn't Lisa become like that?"

"Because when she's eighteen she'll be rich, an heiress. She'll never have to work for her living or have to struggle or learn. We'll live in a house near her mother and she'll get more and more like her mother, vain and neurotic, living on sleeping pills, spending all her time with spiritualists and getting involved in sick cults. When I look at you I don't see Lisa's double. I see *her*, an alternative she, if you like, thirteen years ahead in time if another path had been marked out for her in life. And at the same time I see you as you'd be if you'd led the sort of life she must and will lead."

"You can help her not to lead that life if you love her," said Zoe.

And then Lisa's letters stopped coming. A week went by without a letter. He had resolved, because of what was happening to him, not to see Zoe again. But she lived so near and he thought of her so often that he was unable to resist.

He went to her and told a lie that he had convinced himself was the truth. Lisa was too young to have a firm and faithful love for anyone. Her letters had grown cold and finally had ceased to come.

Zoe listened to him, to his urgent persuasion, his comparison of his forsaken state with her own, and when he kissed her she responded at first with doubt, then with an ardor born of her own loneliness. They made love. When, later, he asked her if he might stay the night, she said he could.

After that he spent every night with her. He hardly went home.

When he did he found ten letters waiting for him on the doormat. Lisa and her mother had gone on to some Aegean island—the home of a mystic Mrs. Cleasant longed to meet—where the mail was uncertain. He read the childish letters, the “darling Peter, I miss you, I’ll never go away again,” with impatience and guilt—and then he went back to Zoe.

Why did he have to mention those letters to her? He wished he hadn’t. It was for her wisdom and her honesty that he had wanted her, and now those very qualities were striking back at him.

“When is she coming home?”

“Next Saturday,” he said.

“Peter, I don’t know what you mean to do—leave me and marry her or leave her and stay with me. And you must tell her about us, whatever you decide.”

“I can’t do that!”

“You must. Either way, you must. And if you mean to stay with me, what alternative have you?”

Stay with them both until he was sure, until he knew for certain. “You know I can’t be without you, Zoe. But I can’t tell her, not yet. She’s such a child.”

“You’re going to marry that child. You love her.”

“Do I?” he said. “I thought I did.”

“I won’t be a party to deceiving her, Peter. You must understand that. If you won’t promise to tell her, I can’t see you again.”

Perhaps when he saw Lisa . . .

He went across the park to her mother’s house on the Sunday evening. The medium was there and another woman who looked like a participant in a Black Mass, earnestly listening to Mrs. Cleasant’s account of the mystic on the Aegean island and his investigations into the mysteries of the Great Pyramid. Lisa rushed into his arms, actually crying with happiness.

“This child has dreamed about you every night, Peter,” said Mrs. Cleasant with one of her weird faraway looks. “Such dreams she has had! Of course she’s psychic like me. When we knew the posts were delayed I wanted her to get a message through to you by the Power of Thought, but she was unwilling.”

“I knew you wouldn’t like it,” said Lisa. She stayed in his arms. Of course he couldn’t tell her. In time, maybe, if he got their wedding postponed and let things cool down and—but it was out of the question to tell her now.

He told Zoe he had. In order to see her again he had to do that.

"How did she take it?"

"Oh, quite well," he lied. "A lot of men have been paying her attention on holiday. I think she's beginning to realize I'm not the only man in the world."

"And she accepts—us?"

Why did she have to persist? Why make it so painful for him? He spoke boldly but with an inner self-disgust.

"I daresay she sees it as a key to her own freedom."

Zoe was convinced. The habitual truth-teller is reluctant to suspect falsehood in others. "Of course I've only met her once, and then only for a few minutes. But I wonder if you weren't deceiving yourself, Peter, when you said she loved you so much. You aren't going to see her again?"

He said he wasn't. He said it was all over, they had parted. But the enormity of what he had done appalled him. And when next he was with Lisa he found himself telling her all over again, and meaning it, how much he loved her and longed to take her away. Was he going to sacrifice that childish passionate love for a woman five years older than himself? The two were, in so many ways, alike. Suppose, in time to come, he grew tired of the one and regretted the other?

Yet, that night, he went back to Zoe.

With a skillful but frightening intrigue he divided his time between the two of them. It wasn't too difficult. Social—and occult—demands were always being made on Lisa. Zoe believed him when he said he had been kept late at work.

Autumn came, and it was still going on, this double life. His need for, his dependence on Zoe intensified and he had begun to resent every moment he spent away from her. But Lisa and her mother had fixed the wedding date and with fatality he accepted its inexorable approach.

On an afternoon in October he was to meet Zoe in Holland Park, by the northern gate. Lisa was going for a fitting of her wedding dress and afterward she was to dine with her mother in what he called the medium's lair. So that was all right. He waited by the gate for nearly an hour.

When Zoe didn't come, he went to her flat but received no answer to his ring. From his own home he telephoned her five times during the evening, but each time the bell rang in emptiness. He passed a sleepless night, the first night he had been on his own for four months.

All the next day, from work, he kept trying to call her, and for the first time since he had known her he made no call to Lisa. But his own phone was ringing when he got home at six. Of course it was Zoe, it must be. He took up the receiver and heard the frightened voice of Mrs. Cleasant.

"Peter?"

Disappointment hurt him like pain. "Yes," he said. "How are you? How's Lisa?"

"Peter, I have very bad news. I think you had better come here. Yes, now. At once."

"What is it? Has anything happened to Lisa?"

"Lisa has—passed over. Last night she took an overdose of my pills. I found her dead this morning."

He went out again at once. In the park, at dusk, the leaves were dying, some already fallen. At this spot, when the leaves had been showing their first green of spring, he had taken the photograph; at this spot he had seated her in a sunny open space and she had first seen Zoe.

Mrs. Cleasant wasn't alone. Some of the members of her magic circle were with her, but she was calmer than he had ever seen her and he guessed she was drugged.

"How did it happen?" he said.

"I told you. She took an overdose."

"But—why?" He shrank away from the medium's eyes which, staring, seemed to see ghosts behind him.

"Nothing to do with you, Peter," said Mrs. Cleasant. "She loved you, you know that. And she was so happy yesterday. Her fitting was canceled. She said she wanted some fresh air because it was such a lovely day, and then she'd walk over to see you. She'd thrown away her charm—that amulet she wore—because she said you didn't like it. I told her not to—it was a harmless thing and might do good. Who knows? If she had been wearing it—"

"Ah, if she had been under the Protection!" said the medium.

Mrs. Cleasant went on, "We were going out to dinner. I waited and waited for her. When she didn't come I went out alone. I thought she was with you, safe with you. But I came back early and there she was, looking so tired and afraid. She said she was going to bed. I asked her if there was anything wrong and she said—"

Mrs. Cleasant's voice quavered into sobs and the witch women fluttered about her, touching her and murmuring.



It was the medium who explained in her corpse voice. "She said she had seen her own double in the park."

"But that was six months ago," he burst out. "That was in April!"

"No, she saw her own double yesterday afternoon, her image walking in the park. And she dared to speak to it. She told me her double spoke of love and of her lover."

He ran away from them then, out of the house. He hailed a taxi and in a shaking whisper asked the driver to take him to where Zoe lived. All the lights were on in her windows. He rang the bell, rang it again and again.

Then, while the lights still blazed but she didn't come down, he hammered on the door with his fists, calling her name. When he knew she wasn't going to come down, that he had lost her, her double and her, he sank down on the doorstep and wept.

The taxi driver, returning along the street in search of a fare, supposed him to be drunk, and learning his address from the broken mutterings, took him home.

He never saw Zoe again.



## The Wrightsville Heirs

When Samuel R. Livingston died, his three children buried him in Twin Hill Cemetery, patted their stepmother Bella hastily, and took off for civilization. There was nothing to hold them in Wrightsville, not even their mother's grave. The first Mrs. Livingston, a Back Bay expatriate, had specified burial in Boston. "I was buried in Wrightsville," her will explained, "long enough."

Bella Bluefield had grown up next door to Sam Livingston, and what she had felt when he went to Boston for a wife she never told anyone. But when the mother of his children died, Bella was still next door waiting. Sam made her their stepmother as soon as he decently could.

"You should have been their mother, Bella," he said.

"I will be, Sam."

But she never was. Samuel, Jr., Everett, and Olivia came home from their private schools and their jaunts about Europe to peck at her cheek, make polite inquiries about her health, commend her currant pie, and then forgot her existence. They treated her from the first with affectionate amusement, as if she were a quaint old family retainer.

After their father's death, aside from a rare well bred note from Samuel, Jr., an occasional jocular postcard from Everett, or another wedding announcement from Olivia, they dropped out of Bella Livingston's life.

So she grew old alone, trying to fill the gaps with the committee meetings and organizational luncheons so dear to old ladies everywhere. When Dr. Farnham began warning her about her heart, she took Amy Upham to live with her.

Amy hailed from the lower end of Hill Drive, where the shade trees were tallest and the houses predated the Revolution. An orphan, she had been brought up by her widowed uncle, Dr. Horace Upham, whose practice among the poor of Low Village was the largest and least "paying" in Wrightsville. Then Dr. Upham himself sickened, and during his long last illness Amy abandoned her premed course at Merrimac U. to nurse him. Her uncle died leaving nothing but uncollectible bills; the old house was sold for debts and

Amy found herself without home or means of support. Bella Livingston offered both.

Amy Upham was a quick small blonde girl with clear brown eyes that occasionally veiled over, as if to shut out things. But only occasionally. For the most part those lovely eyes looked at life squarely. Somewhere she had fought a battle with bitterness, and had won. Bella Livingston's friends thought her a fine girl, with no nonsense about her; their sons thought the same, although for rather different reasons.

Amy was naturally cheerful, and she bustled about the Livingston mansion leaving order and sunshine in her wake. Dorcas Bondy and Morris Hunker, the "staff," soon came to adore her. As old Dorcas sniffed to her mistress, "What did we ever do without that pretty lamb?"—a question Mrs. Livingston had been asking herself with increasing frequency.

Sometimes the old lady was troubled. "I feel so guilty, Amy. It's no life for a young girl, especially one as pretty as you, being buried in this drafty old house."

"Buried!" Amy would laugh. "I love it—and you."

And old Bella would kiss her, knowing it was true. She had watched Amy Upham grow up—much like herself—needing someone who needed her. They never talked about the boy Amy had been engaged to; the one who was killed in Korea; or about Amy's parents, whom she could not remember.

But the old lady talked often about her stepchildren, whose careers she followed in the *Wrightsville Record* with grim interest. As the Livingston file in the *Record*'s morgue grew, Bella's grimness grew with it.

So Amy was surprised one day when the old lady suddenly said, "Amy, get in touch with Samuel, Jr., Everett, and Olivia and tell them—wherever they are—to come see me."

"But will they?" Amy exclaimed.

"They will if you say I want them to. They're too well bred to refuse. Breeding," said Bella dryly, "is my stepchildren's long suit."

They arrived on a weekend in early summer.

Amy thought them charming. Olivia was like an expensive jewel, finely cut, exquisitely set, and unbreakable; but there were humanizing puffs of fatigue under her eyes, her clothes were wonderful, and she greeted Amy with no trace of the condescension Amy had expected. Everett proved a broad jovial sort, with a skin like a baked potato; he engulfed her hand and said tenderly how touched they

all were for her taking care of "Mother." And Samuel, Jr., the eldest, seemed a darling—a tall thin stooped man with a courtly manner who might have stepped out of one of John P. Marquand's novels.

The old lady was waiting for them serenely on the lawn when Morris Hunker chauffeured them up from Wrightsville Station in the old Livingston Lincoln, and she personally directed Morris's disposition of their luggage.

"You've given us our old bedrooms," Olivia said when they rejoined her on the lawn. "How sweet, Bella."

"It was sweet of you all to come," said the old lady sweetly. "Amy dear, have Dorcas fetch the tea at once."

When Amy returned with Dorcas and the laden tea wagon, she found them conversing amiably.

"I never could see that fellow, Sis," Samuel, Jr. was drawling. "He wore handpainted neckties."

"Which husband was that, Olivia?" the old lady asked with interest. "The Prussian baron or the French count?"

"The Spanish prince," said Olivia, wrinkling her nose.

"The one who cost you two hundred thousand dollars?"

"Oh, dear," said Olivia. "No sugar, thank you, Amy, and *lots* of lemon."

"With your figure?" smiled Amy. "Look what Dorcas's cooking is doing to mine."

"I haven't stopped looking since I arrived," said Everett. "Warm, isn't it? How about a swim, Amy?"

"Don't," said Olivia to Amy.

"Traitor," scowled Everett. "Why, Bella, GaGa's on the market again. She's between husbands, you know."

"GaGa?" said the old lady. "Oh, your newspaper name."

"So it finally got to Wrightsville," said Olivia calmly.

"Death to journalism," said Everett, raising his teacup.

"Yes, the papers haven't treated you very nicely, either, have they, Everett?" said Bella Livingston. "I've often wondered why you thought you could make money out of sports."

"An All-American nomination and that million from Father. Oh, well. Cheers."

"Let's see. Your professional football team, midget auto racing—both of those failed. Now you're trying to buy a basketball team, aren't you?"

"Lovely girl you have here, Bella," said Everett. "Lovely."

"Thank you, Mr. Livingston," murmured Amy.

"Ev. No, really, Amy, let's cool off in the pond."

"Don't," said Olivia again.

"And Samuel," said the old lady. "You lost yours in oil and mines, didn't you? The latest, I hear, is uranium."

"Was," said Samuel, Jr., reaching for a watercress sandwich.

"Was, Bella. Yes, you find us all financially mortified."

"In fact," said Everett, but looking at Amy, "broke."

"There's always dear old Charles," said Olivia. "My Texas oil admirer, Bella. But Charles has such disgusting table manners."

"Marry him, GaGa," urged Everett. "For the financing in that basketball deal I'd cut him in for sixty percent. And maybe five for little you."

"Don't be vulgar."

"Don't be stupid," said Samuel, Jr. "Charlie Waggoner sold me the wells I dropped a quarter of a million in."

There was a lull. The old lady kept smiling at them. Amy began to feel uncomfortable.

"All right, Bella dear," Samuel, Jr., smiled back. "You've had your fears confirmed. Why the summons?"

"I'll tell you after supper. Herbert Wentworth's coming."

"Father's old legal beagle?"

"Old Mr. Wentworth's been dead for years, Samuel. His son took over managing the estate."

"That'll be jolly," said Everett. "At least let's walk down to the pond for a look, Amy. I'll show you where I once almost drowned GaGa."

"Show *me*," said Olivia grimly, rising. "Excuse us?"

Samuel, Jr. wandered off after them.

When the three had disappeared, Amy said quietly, "Aren't you overexciting yourself, Mother Livingston?"

"You do know me, dear, don't you?" The old lady's cheeks were bright pink. "By the way, Olivia is taking care of Everett."

"As long as I stay out of a bathing suit, I imagine I'm safe," said Amy, smiling. "You're sure you're all right?"

"Just fine, dear."

But Amy worried about her all through dinner. Olivia talked about Cannes and Balenciaga, a rather sulky Everett diagrammed the bloodlines of a racing thoroughbred he was thinking of buying, and Samuel, Jr. gallantly commended the currant pie, while the old lady's pinkness deepened.

Herbert Wentworth arrived on the tick of eight. He was a cadaverous Yankee with a voice like a waterlogged harp.

There was no mistaking where Mr. Wentworth's sympathies lay. "I'll go over this with no hems and no haws," he announced frigidly when they were all settled in the vast museum of a drawing room. "Under the terms of Samuel R. Livingston's will each of his three children was left one million dollars, supposedly aggregating the bulk of his fortune. The widow was left the real and personal property plus the residuary estate. This was believed at the time to be just enough to care for her needs.

"However!" Mr. Wentworth surveyed the prodigals without joy. "A secret codicil to your father's will enjoined my father, as administrator of the estate, from disclosing the true state of affairs to you; and your stepmother was directed to keep it a secret from you, too."

"Why?" demanded Everett.

His sister said, "Shut up, *darling*."

"Because," retorted the lawyer with a smack of his dentures, "your father was worth a whole lot more than he let on, and he didn't want you to know it till you became responsible enough to handle it. Sam Livingston didn't think his children had the proper respect for capital."

"So your father left it up to me to decide," said the old lady, and at the sound of her voice they turned to stare at her, "when—if ever—you were to get it. Herbert, read the codicil."

Mr. Wentworth took a worn document from his briefcase and read it through in loudly twanging tones. Then he handed it to Samuel, Jr. Samuel, Jr. read it and passed it to Everett. Everett read it and tossed it to Olivia. Olivia studied it for some time before handing it back to the lawyer.

"The codicil doesn't mention figures," Olivia said lightly. "How much does it amount to, Bella?"

The old lady looked at her, and Olivia flushed.

"For a long time I thought Sam was wrong to deprive you of the extra money just because of me. So years ago I made a will leaving everything to you three in equal shares. But—" and at the word they grew very still "—now I know that Sam was right. Give me one good reason why I should leave that money to you."

"The best reason in the world, Bella," Olivia said reasonably. "The money was Father's and we're his children."

"The money is mine, and how have you ever treated me?"

There was a silence. Amy began to wish she could get out of the room without being noticed.

"Why, Bella, very decently, I've always thought—" began Everett in a hearty tone.

"Like a mother, Everett? What date is my birthday?"

He glanced quickly at Olivia, who quickly turned to her elder brother.

"Don't look at *me*," said Samuel, Jr. "You're perfectly right, old dear, we've been absolute swine. But, Bella," her eldest stepchild said ruefully, "who else is there to leave it to?"

"Amy."

Amy almost fell off the arm of the old lady's chair. The waxy hand reached up to touch her.

"Since your father was taken from me, this child has been the only soul in the world who's cared if I live or die. She's run my house, fed me, read to me, managed my card parties, rubbed my feet, cheered me up, nursed me through a heart attack. She's devoted her young life to keeping me comfortable and happy. I couldn't love Amy Upham more if she were my own.

"But you *are* my husband's children," said Bella Livingston with some difficulty. "It's been very hard knowing the right thing to do. That's why I had to see you again. I know Dr. Farnham doesn't think my heart will survive another attack. I've got to make a decision one way or the other."

The stout old body struggled to rise. Amy helped her, hardly knowing what she was doing.

"I've given myself till Sunday to decide about a new will," said the old lady, and she went out leaning on Amy's arm.

That was a Friday evening.

At seven-thirty Sunday morning Amy, in her bathrobe, trudged upstairs from the kitchen with the old lady's ritual "wake-up" coffee, entered the master bedroom with a cheery "Good morning!" and found Bella Livingston glaring back at her from the curly maple bed, dead.

On Tuesday morning the shrilling of his telephone roused Ellery Queen from his sleep in Manhattan and a twanging voice identified the speaker as Attorney Herbert Wentworth calling from Wrightsville. Mr. Wentworth was sorry to be phoning so early but it was at the urgent suggestion of Mr. Queen's friend Chief of Police Dakin, and could Mr. Queen take the next plane to Wrightsville? Old Mrs.

Bella Livingston had died Sunday and Chief Dakin was sure now it was murder, and a real baffler at that.

"At first, Mr. Queen," said Chief Dakin, looking more like a sorrowing Abe Lincoln than ever, "Amy thought old Bella had died of a heart attack. But something about the look of things made her phone Mr. Wentworth and me without waking up the others. On Coroner Grupp's and the lab's reports I'm satisfied now that one of those three snuck into her bedroom in the middle of the night of Saturday-Sunday, around three A.M., and held a pillow over her face till she smothered to death. The thing is, which one? Nothing to tell that I can see, and I've questioned 'em and studied reports till I'm blue in the face."

"Murder," said Mr. Wentworth soggily, swabbing his brow.

Ellery looked the room and the reports over for the fourth time. Dakin had driven him from the airport to the mansion on the Hill, saying that with everyone over at Willis Stone's Eternal Rest Mortuary on Upper Whistling, where the services were going on, they would have the Livingston place to themselves.

The emptiness of the big old house had weight.

"I see nothing here, Dakin," Ellery said. "Let's talk downstairs."

In the drawing room the silence was less oppressive.

"Now, Mr. Wentworth, about the old lady's visit to your office."

"There were two visits, Mr. Queen. The first was a week ago Monday, four days before those three got to town. Morris drove her to High Village—"

"Alone?"

"Yes. She'd come in, she said, to ask me what the right wording of a holograph will would be 'in case' she wanted to write one. I gave her a sample will form, and she left."

"And her second visit?"

"Was Saturday—the morning after the conference, when she told 'em they were her heirs but she was thinking of changing her will. She used the excuse of a D.A.R. lunch in High Village to come down to my office in a taxi without anyone knowing, not even Amy. She brought with her a new will she told me she'd written out late Friday night—a will, she said, no one knew about yet."

"Decided not to wait for Sunday after all," nodded Ellery. "What does the new will provide, Mr. Wentworth?"

"Don't know. It was a single sheet, folded so only the space for signing showed. My law clerk and office girl witnessed her signature,



she sealed the envelope herself in our presence, and she waited till I locked the will in my office safe."

"Somebody's in for a real shock." Dakin glanced grimly at his watch. "They're about ready to bury old Bella now."

Ellery rose. "Let's get out to the cemetery."

He was puzzled, and he thought the funeral might tell him something.

The Livingston plot on the sunny west slope of Twin Hill Cemetery smelled of breeze, grass, and grief. All the tottering Hill contingent were there, Bella Livingston's lifelong friends—Hermione Wright, the Granjon clan, the Wheelers, the Minikins, Judge Eli Martin, Emmy DuPré, and the rest; Amy Upham, her pretty face swollen, stricken, and lost; old Dorcas weeping and Morris Hunker blowing his nose; and Bella Livingston's three stepchildren tightly knotted, but with no show of false sorrow. Ellery thought it clever of them.

He watched closely as Dr. Doolittle lowered the Book and the silent scattering began. But the three Livingstons merely made the slow correct march back to the Lincoln and there waited patiently for Amy.

And back at the house on the Hill they were unreadable, too. Chief Dakin introduced Ellery with brutal suddenness as "come up from New York to look into Bella's murder." Amy clung to Mr. Wentworth as if he were her one remaining link to the past, seeming hardly to realize why Ellery was there. But the Livingstons chatted with him charmingly; and when the lawyer produced a long envelope sealed with red wax and, clearing his throat, asked everyone to be seated, they nested down side by side in the dead woman's slipcovered sofa with martinis in their hands and just the right air of well bred expectancy.

They remained that way while Wentworth broke the seal and took from the envelope a sheet of white onionskin paper—while he unfolded it and held it up to the sunlight coming through the bay window so that line after line of closely spaced handwriting showed through. Only when he read the date did they stiffen.

"I, Bella Bluefield Livingston, residing at 410 Hill Drive, Wrightsville," Mr. Wentworth's damp twang informed them, "do hereby make, publish, and declare this to be my last will and testament, *revoking all other and former wills and codicils heretofore made by me.*"

So there was the ending before the story was well begun.

Everett's shrug was a masterpiece: That's that, it said. Nice going,

girl, was the message of Olivia's smile to Amy. And Samuel, Jr. tossed off the rest of his martini and nodded philosophically.

And yet to one of them, Ellery thought, it must be a sickening blow.

He went over to follow the shaky but determined handwriting on the paper in Wentworth's hands as a cover for his surveillance. Provision for funeral expenses, payment of debts and taxes, the Wentworth law firm as administrator, bequests to Dorcas Bondy, Morris Hunker, and several Wrightsville charities. Then:

"The property on Hill Drive, real and personal, and the income from the residue of my estate—the principal value of which totals about \$1,000,000—I leave to my dear young friend Amy Upham for the duration of her lifetime. On Amy Upham's death the principal estate is to pass to my late husband's three children, Samuel, Jr., Everett, and Olivia, in equal shares, or in the event of their predecease, to their heirs or assigns."

Ellery could only admire them. In a body they rose and went to Amy, petrified in her chair, and congratulated her as sportsmen gracefully acknowledge a race well run and lost.

"Well, gentlemen," said Samuel, Jr., turning to them, "that seems to settle that."

"Yes," said Ellery, "but it doesn't settle the question of who smothered Bella Livingston three nights ago."

They looked pained.

"Do I understand from that remark, Mr. Queen," asked the tall man courteously, "that one of us is seriously suspected of having murdered our stepmother?"

"Whom else would you suggest?"

"That's not my province. Though I should think a tramp—"

"Tramps break in to steal, Mr. Livingston. Nothing was stolen or even disturbed. No sneak thief, I'm afraid."

"Then allow me to point out that Olivia, my brother, and I gain nothing by Bella's death."

"Murder is not wiped off the books," Ellery reminded him with matching courtesy, "because it fails to show a profit. The facts indicate no one involved knew your stepmother had executed a new will Saturday morning. If that's so, she was murdered Saturday night by someone who thought the old will was still in force. By someone, you see, who *would* have gained."

"And that's us," Olivia laughed. "Forgive me, darlings. I'm trying to see myself smothering Bella."

"The trouble with you fellows is," said Everett, "you have the middle-class attitude about money. It's really not that important."

"The whole notion is mad," Samuel, Jr. shrugged. "But I suppose you'll have to satisfy yourselves. Are we under house arrest, or what?"

"Let's just say," said Chief of Police Dakin, "that we're all going to stay on here for a few days till things kind of gel. I'll be in and out, but Mr. Queen and Herb Wentworth will be here to keep you company. The papers ain't onto this yet, so we ought to have a nice quiet time."

When the last light blinked out in the house, Ellery came up from the black lawn to the moon-whitened back porch and sat cautiously down in a rocker.

Having known Bella Livingston in life, he wanted very much to catch her smotherer. She had deserved a better death. But there was simply nothing to go on. He had told that to Dakin before the chief left for the night. He had told Dakin something else, too, but the old man had been skeptical. "That ain't in the cards, Mr. Queen," Dakin had said, "not with you and Wentworth here." And he had added stubbornly, "Bella was an eighth grader in the old Piney Road School when I was a skinny little firster, and she used to wipe my bloody nose when the big boys licked me. I ain't letting those three go."

But it was in the cards. What to do?

A light step, the sigh of the screen door, and a gasp decided the issue for him.

"It's only me, Miss Upham," Ellery said, getting up. "Too warm for sleep?"

"Warm!" Amy shivered as she sat down on the top step. "I couldn't imagine who was sitting out here." She drew her bathrobe closer about her. "I'm glad it's you," she said suddenly.

"Why?"

"I don't know." She stared into the dark. "Shouldn't I be?"

"Yes," Ellery said. "You should be very glad it's me."

She turned to him then. Something in the flat blacks and whites of his moonlit face made her swollen eyes widen.

Ellery sat down on the steps beside her and took her little cold hands in his. "You strike me as a girl who's had to face a lot of unpleasant realities, Amy. I hope I'm not wrong, because I'm going to throw the book at you."

"I don't understand."

"Bella Livingston made a terrible mistake when she wrote out that new will Friday night."

"Oh, I know! She shouldn't have left me the money—"

"That wasn't her mistake. Her mistake, Amy, was in leaving you merely the income from it for your lifetime and providing that thereafter the principal go to her stepchildren."

Amy looked bewildered. "She didn't want to cut them off altogether—"

"She also didn't know one of them would kill her in the belief that the old will was in force." Ellery's hands tightened on hers. "Amy," he said urgently, "lock your door at night. Try never to be alone." She twisted to stare up at him. "That clause in the new will gives Bella Livingston's murderer a second chance. Because the only thing now that stands between him and a third of a million dollars is . . . you."

Amy Upham's face went white as the moon.

"He'd kill . . . me?"

"Dakin and Wentworth don't think he'll chance it. I do. That's why, Amy, I had to warn you."

The frozen wreckage in her face made him touch her reassuringly. His touch sent everything tumbling about, and he took her in his arms.

She clung to him like a child.

"I'm afraid," Amy whispered. "I'm afraid."

Ellery took Amy upstairs in the darkness, but even at the door of her room she would not let go of him.

"I know I'm being silly . . ."

"After I've scared you half to death?" He squeezed her arm. "Let's have a look together."

He searched her bedroom and bathroom. "Nobody here but us chickens," he said and she smiled faintly. "Lock and bolt your door and go to bed. I can get to you in five seconds from across the hall. Understand, Amy?"

"Yes, sir," said Amy; and she suddenly kissed him. Then she flushed scarlet and pushed him into the hall.

He did not move until he heard the key turn over and the bolt slide into place.

He made a groping tour of the sleeping rooms, soundlessly trying doors. Old Dorcas's and Morris Hunker's on the attic floor were

unlocked, as was the door to the guest room where Mr. Wentworth snored melodiously. But the Livingston brothers had locked themselves in. He could hear them tossing about in their beds.

The door of their sister's room gave to his touch. Ellery nudged it open, listening.

"Who's that?" Olivia's voice came sharply out of the dark.

"Oh," said Ellery. "Thought this was my room. Sorry."

He let the door click shut loudly. She must sleep like a cat.

It seemed to him as he got into bed that there was a mocking quality to the darkness.

He floundered after sleep, his cheek still tingling where Amy had put her kiss. Lonely little thing—remarkably strong. His biceps ached where she had clutched him. Old Bella's money would make a full life possible for her—and sudden death, too, unless by some miracle he could see guilt where no guilt showed.

He kept straining after every sound in the old house until, exhausted, he fell asleep.

When he came downstairs Wednesday morning Ellery found Olivia and Mr. Wentworth at breakfast.

"Ah, the man who mislaid his room," said Olivia. "Did you ever find it, Mr. Queen?"

Ellery smiled back. "Your brothers still asleep?"

"Sam and Ev? They never roll out before noon."

"I wish Amy would get up," said the lawyer crossly. "I told her last night she'd have to sign some papers this morning. I've got to run over to the courthouse."

"Just coffee, Dorcas." Ellery frowned. "Amy hasn't been down yet?"

"Oh, let the child sleep," murmured Olivia. "She'll collect her million a day later."

Mr. Wentworth glanced at her coldly. "Dorcas—"

"Never mind." Ellery jumped up. "I'll get her."

I've really got to stop acting like an old biddy, Ellery thought as he tried to keep from running up the stairs.

He knocked on Amy's door.

"Amy." He tried the door; it was locked. "Amy!"

He rattled the knob.

Doors opened. Everett's voice grumbled somewhere.

"Something wrong, Queen?" That was Samuel, Jr.

"I don't know, Amy!" Ellery pounded.

Olivia and the Wrightsville lawyer came flying up the stairs. "What's the matter?"

"Help me with this door!"

At the second lunge the lock and bolt gave. Amy was lying on her bed in a queer way, cramped and very still.

"My God." Mr. Wentworth was ashy. "Is she . . . dead?"

"No," said Ellery swiftly over the unconscious girl. "Phone a doctor, Mr. Wentworth. Conk Farnham if possible. And Dakin. Send Dorcas up immediately, I'll need her till medical help comes. The rest of you—out!"

Dr. Conklin Farnham opened Amy's door. "You can talk to her now."

They tiptoed into the bedroom. The late afternoon sun revealed a bloodless Amy, propped on pillows and looking very small and lost in the big bed. A strapping trained nurse with a pugnacious jaw sat by the bed.

Ellery took Amy's hand. It tightened in his.

"Feeling better now?"

"Yes." She tried to smile.

"What happened last night?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't unlock your door? Let anyone in?"

"No. I took a sleeping pill with some juice I had on my night table and went to bed. That's all I remember."

"The laboratory report indicates you swallowed about six of them, Amy—luckily, not a lethal dose. You're sure you took only one tablet?"

"Positive. I'm careful about drugs—Uncle Horace taught me that. It came from a bottle of sleeping pills in my medicine chest."

"We know, Amy. Who brought you that juice?" Chief Dakin asked gently.

"Nobody, Mr. Dakin. I'd poured it myself in the kitchen and taken it upstairs with me when I started to go to bed the first time. But I felt restless, so I went back downstairs where I found Mr. Queen on the porch—"

"Leaving the glass on the night table." Ellery glanced at Dakin. "I noticed it when I brought Amy back up last night."

"By then it was doped." The police chief glowered. "Somebody snuck into her room while she was down on the back porch talking

to you, and he fixed that juice just dandy—without leaving a print on anything!"

"Mr. Queen, I'd like to talk to you," Amy said.

"You'll do the rest of your talking tomorrow, young lady," said Dr. Farnham.

"Now don't worry about her," he told them in the hall. "She'll be as good as new by morning. Mrs. Olin will stay with her all night."

On the way downstairs Dakin said, "I owe you an apology, Mr. Queen. I just never figured they'd try it."

"And I never thought to check that juice," Ellery mumbled. "Dakin, is the nurse reliable?"

"Libby Olin?" Dakin snorted. "Well, here they are."

The Livingston trio were sprawled in the drawing room, waiting peacefully under the codfish eye of Mr. Wentworth and one of Chief Dakin's young policemen.

"She's all right, Mr. Wentworth," Ellery said; and he turned to the Livingstons with bitterness. "Whichever of you tried to overdose Amy last night has gambled and lost. She's very much alive, and the lot of us are dedicated to the proposition that she's going to stay that way."

"From now on," growled the chief of police, "Amy Upham's going to be guarded twenty-four hours a day!"

"A smart poker player knows when his luck's run out," Ellery said. "You can't win that million any more, but you can stand pat on the gamble that we won't be able to call you for Bella Livingston's murder or the attempt on Amy."

"And don't go thinking that because we haven't called you yet," said Dakin, "you can pick up and run." His Yankee jaw aimed at them. "You ain't setting foot off these grounds—none of you."

"You know," murmured Samuel Jr., "you fellows amaze me. How long do you suppose you could hold us here if we insisted on leaving? You have absolutely nothing on us."

"And for the simplest of reasons," smiled Olivia. "We haven't done anything."

"What's keeping us here," Everett said, "is a temporary embarrassment and the three crude but nourishing meals a day."

"Well, in my case it's rather more than that." The elder brother set his drink down with a little bang, looking up at Ellery and Dakin with no charm whatever. "At first your accusations were amusing, but now the humor is palling. I'm beginning to feel persecuted, gentlemen, and it's a feeling I don't like!"

"On top of which," said Olivia, "a Livingston never runs."

"Besides," grinned Everett, "you might clap us in the pokey. In the present state of my finances, a suit for false arrest would buy me that basketball franchise."

"Neat," said Ellery. "Even convincing. But I repeat—don't press your luck."

He strode out.

"I can't say I blame you, Amy," Ellery said.

"Well, I've had a lot of time to think since yesterday." Amy stared out over the lawn. Ellery kicked one of the loose floorboards.

It was Thursday afternoon, and they were sitting in the old summerhouse on the back lawn. The young policeman was standing under a tree nearby, nervously alert. The sun through the lattice-work checkered Amy's hollow cheeks and frightened eyes in a grotesque pattern. She kept staring out through the summerhouse doorway at the big house, and its rear windows shimmered like eyes.

"We could let them go, of course," muttered Ellery.

"And if one of them skulked back next week? Or even next year?"

Amy shook her head. "Don't you see, Mr. Queen, I'd never have another day's peace—for the rest of my life!"

"I can only tell you that we're checking them exhaustively. If we find that one of them is not merely broke but desperately in debt, it will pinpoint a murder motive. And I've had Dakin send the file of prints and material up to Boston as a check on the Connhaven lab." Ellery scowled at the dappled floor. "I don't want to influence you, Amy. It's your life. But a step like this would be irrevocable."

"You think I'm a coward—"

"Hardly, Amy."

"It's not the thought of dying. I'm . . . sort of used to death. My father and mother, Uncle Horace, and—" Amy bit her lips. "It's the *fear*," she said. "The waiting for it. The never knowing."

Amy got up and went to the doorway. In her white summer frock the sunlight gave her a transparency uncomfortably like a ghost's. "I couldn't live a life like that. I'm going back to the house, Mr. Queen, and tell them they can have it all."

Ellery looked up and sprang.

The flash from the attic window and his lunge were almost simultaneous. But the rifle crack reached his ears even as he bowled Amy over from behind onto the grass and covered her with his body.



The policeman was running hard toward the house, tugging at his holster.

Ellery turned his head for a look. The attic window from which the flash had come was empty.

"What happened?" Amy's voice came muffled, but calm.

"You're not hit?" he demanded.

"Only by you."

He helped her to her feet and stared about, baffled.

Then he saw it.

The bullet had ripped through the summerhouse roof a good eight feet above and beyond where Amy's head had been.

Ellery came downstairs with the rifle just as the policeman was hanging up the phone in the foyer.

"Chief's coming right away, Mr. Queen."

"Talk to Dorcas and Morris Hunker?"

"They didn't see a thing. They were in the kitchen, Dorcas fixing a chicken pie for supper and Morris washing the lunch dishes. All they did was duck."

Ellery found Herbert Wentworth in the drawing room pounding fist into palm, his incensed length between Amy and the Livingstons as if to shield her from a head-on attack.

"I'm good and darn tired of this hocus!" the lawyer was shouting. "You let this girl be, d'ye hear?"

"You bore me, Mr. Wentworth." Olivia's cheeks were spotty with anger. She was in shorts and a halter, and her skin looked oiled.

Her brothers were glaring.

Ellery stepped into the drawing room. The policeman blocked the doorway.

"Samuel R. Livingston's gun," said Ellery, holding it up. "It has his name plate on the butt."

"Father's old deer rifle." Samuel, Jr. half rose.

"Mother Livingston wouldn't part with it." Amy sounded so grim that Ellery glanced at her. "She kept it in the attic storeroom."

"Where I found it, dropped near the window. Plus an old box of ammo freshly broken into. When Dakin gets here we'll have the gun and box gone over." Ellery set the rifle down with care. "While we're waiting, suppose I put the classic question: Where were you three when the shot was fired?"

Olivia shrilled, "I was on the roof taking a sunbath."

"Alone?"

"I sunbathe in the nude, Mr. Queen!"

Ellery glanced at Everett, who was no longer looking at Amy with appreciation. Everett no longer looked at Amy at all.

"I'd been down to the pond for a swim," the chunky brother grunted, "and I was back in the house under a shower. I didn't even hear the shot." His thick body was wrapped in a damp bathrobe.

"And I was sitting right here listening to a news broadcast." Samuel, Jr.'s nostrils were a little pinched. "By the way, I haven't fired a gun in fifteen years, and my sister and brother can't hit the side of a barn."

"Neither could the one who shot at Amy," Ellery said. "Mr. Wentworth, did you happen to see any of these people?"

"Not soon enough to corroborate their alibis," snapped the lawyer. "The shot woke me from a nap and by the time I got my shoes on they were all together in the hall. Mr. Queen, if Dakin keeps these three on the premises after this—"

"Before we go into better security measures, I believe Amy has an announcement. Amy?"

"No."

"No?"

"I've changed my mind, Mr. Queen." Amy was studying the Livingstons with compressed lips. "I was going to sign everything over to you three after one of you tried to kill me with those sleeping pills. But now I'm *mad*! If you want that money, you're going to have to shoot a lot straighter than you shot today. Because I'm *not* going to be scared off."

Ellery was staring at her. "What did you say, Amy?"

"I said, Mr. Queen, they're not going to scare me any more."

Olivia jumped up. "I've had about as much of this farce—!"

"Sit down, sit down," Ellery said, but he was still staring at Amy Upham. Then he said slowly, "Officer, nobody's to leave this room till Chief Dakin gets here."

He stumbled past the policeman and disappeared.

"There you are." Chief Dakin shut the door of Bella Livingston's bedroom hastily. "No prints on the gun or ammo box, no clues in the attic—no *anything*," he said in despair.

But then he stopped, struck by Ellery's silence.

Ellery was crouched at the old lady's Governor Winthrop desk in the bay overlooking the front lawn. The room had been locked up since the murder, and his hands were dusty. He had pulled open all

the drawers and dumped their contents on the desk—letters, household bills, canceled checks, various kinds of stationery, old invitations to Wrightsville functions—the accumulation of years. But Ellery was not looking at them; he was gazing into space.

"Something *else* wrong, Mr. Queen?"

"Sit down, Dakin. I want to talk to you."

Mr. Wentworth was just taking the candlewick spread off his bed Friday night when someone tapped furtively on his door.

"Who is it?"

"Amy." Her whisper was urgent. "Quick."

He snatched the door open, alarmed. "What's the matter?"

"Shh! Nothing. I can't stay but a second—"

"Are you out of your mind, Amy? After we locked you in for the night!"

Amy whispered rapidly, "Please, I've got to talk to you, Mr. Wentworth. Just you."

"Me? Now?"

"No, not now—that policeman keeps trying my door every few minutes. Meet me at the pond tomorrow morning early—say, six o'clock. Will you?" Amy's brown eyes kept searching the hall. "You've got to, Mr. Wentworth," she said fiercely. "Will you?"

The lawyer was bewildered. "But, Amy—"

But Amy was gone.

Mr. Wentworth hurried through Bella Livingston's woods in the damp of early morning Saturday, shivering. He had tossed about all night, perplexed and uneasy. What could Amy Upham possibly have to confide in him that Queen and Chief Dakin mustn't hear?

And why, he suddenly thought, in such a lonely spot?

He found himself wanting very much to turn back. *It's almost as if I were in danger . . .*

But that was ridiculous.

Mr. Wentworth shivered again and hurried on.

He heard Amy's shriek just as the pond began to glitter through the birch and pine.

"Help! Somebody help!"

The lawyer scrambled out on the tumbledown landing. The Livingston rowboat lay fifty yards offshore, deep in the water and settling fast. Amy was trying frantically to row through a patch of water lilies.

"Mr. Wentworth!" she screamed. "Somebody put a hole in the boat and I can't swim!"

The boat suddenly sank. Amy disappeared.

Mr. Wentworth kicked off his shoes in a panic and dived in. He came up gasping. Amy was thrashing about, making glubbing sounds.

"Hang on to the boat!" he yelled. He made directly for her, swimming as fast as he could. She went under again just as he reached her. She came up clutching, all tangled in the lilies. "Let go, Amy!" He had to fight her all the way back to the landing. When he dragged her out of the water he was exhausted. "You all right?" he panted.

"You all right, Amy?" a voice echoed.

"Yes," said Amy in a queer voice; and Mr. Wentworth twisted in amazement. Two men stood behind them. His heart jumped. But then he saw who they were.

"Queen, Dakin!" He staggered to his feet gladly. "Hole in the boat—they tried to drown her—I had to jump in after her—"

"We know," said Ellery. "We saw the whole thing."

"In fact," said Chief Dakin, "it was sort of a trap."

"Trap?" The lawyer shook his head dazedly. "What do you mean?"

Ellery sat down on a log and lit a cigarette. "You're certainly entitled to the fullest explanation. Right, Amy?" But Amy said nothing. She suddenly sat up and began to shake out her hair.

"Thursday afternoon," Ellery said, "Amy remarked that she wasn't going to be 'scared' out of her inheritance. That hadn't occurred to me—that the nonlethal dose of sleeping pills and the rifle shot that missed so badly were attempts, not to kill Amy, but merely to frighten her into giving up the estate. It was the wrong possibility, as it turned out, but it led me to the right one."

"I don't understand, Queen!"

"We'd been taking it for granted that Bella Livingston's killer is also out to kill Amy," Ellery went on, studying Amy's graceful gestures. "But suppose he isn't? Suppose he's only trying to make it look that way? That's what I asked myself. And I saw that so long as we assumed Amy was also meant to be murdered, the motive continued to point to the three Livingstons, the only ones who benefit from her death. But if Amy *wasn't* really meant to be murdered, then the whole assumption of the Livingstons' guilt was out of joint and we had to reexamine the case from the beginning:

"That's just what I did, Mr. Wentworth. I went back to Bella's new will."

Amy was calmly stripping off her dress. There was a bathing suit underneath, and much sun-burnished skin. Mr. Wentworth gaped.

"It struck me at once what a curious-looking will that is," Ellery said. "With all sorts of writing paper to choose from—I checked Bella Livingston's desk in her bedroom—her will is nevertheless written on onionskin paper. Why *onionskin*, a paper so thin it's translucent? Translucent—like tracing paper. Tracing paper! Was it possible old Bella had written her new will on ordinary paper, *but someone had traced over it and substituted the tracing for the original?*"

Ellery flicked his cigarette into the pond. "You see how one thought led to another, Mr. Wentworth. Why a *tracing* of a will? Obviously, to make a change. A simple change, for a complex one—as in forming new words—would have required the tracer to be an expert forger. What simple change? I recalled that the will gave the approximate value of Bella Livingston's principal estate as one million dollars. And it came to me in a flash: Suppose the genuine will had given the value of the estate as four million, or seven million, or nine million dollars? How simple it would be, in a tracing, to leave out the wedge of the four, the horizontal stroke of the seven, or the loop of the nine! Then four, seven, or nine becomes one, and a multimillion-dollar estate magically becomes a one-million-dollar estate.

"But that led to an astonishing conclusion, Mr. Wentworth. Who could have made that tracing? Why, only the man who had possession of the new will from Saturday morning, when Bella Livingston signed it before witnesses in his office, until Tuesday afternoon, when he produced the tracing after the funeral and purported it to be the original. And who would benefit by such a change? Strangely enough, only the same man—who's been handling Bella Livingston's affairs for years and who's named administrator of her estate. You, Mr. Wentworth."

Herbert Wentworth squatted like a frightened toad on the landing.

"You're not your father's son, Wentworth," said Ellery. "Your father would have cut his hands off before he touched a penny of the moneys entrusted to him. But you couldn't resist the golden opportunity handed to you. You had the new will, its contents unknown. You had the stocks and the bonds and the records. And in old Bella's house were three live suspects if anything should happen to her. So you stole into her house at three A.M. last Sunday, crept into her bedroom, and smothered her in her sleep—knowing you had until Tuesday to make a tracing of her will and change the figure

she had put down to a one . . . giving you the balance to pocket and all the time in the world—you thought—to cover your tracks.”

“Only you didn’t make it, Wentworth,” said Chief Dakin in his sorrowing way. “I’ve had lawyers from the State’s Attorney’s office working on this behind your back since Thursday night. They’ve already uncovered enough to show that the estate’s worth four million dollars easy. And of course we just took that onionskin will back from the Court of Probate and turned it over to experts. Why, Herb, you left a fingerprint *under* some of the tracing.” Dakin shook his head. “And when we opened your safe-deposit box by court order yesterday we even found the original of Bella’s new will. Now why’d you save that, Herb? I guess maybe because it ain’t so easy to change the honest habits of a lifetime.”

Amy turned suddenly to look at the pond.

“Finally,” Ellery said, “those two attempts on Amy’s life. I knew you’d killed Bella, Wentworth; but I was merely assuming you’d dosed Amy’s fruit juice and fired the shot at her in order to cast further suspicion on the Livingstons. If my assumption was correct, your attempts on Amy were deliberate phonies. If I was right you didn’t *want* her to die—in fact, you’d go far to preserve her life, because Amy murdered within days of Bella’s murder would bring that traced will back under scrutiny.

“So,” said Ellery, “I got Amy to stage a little drowning scene this morning to see what you would do. And you did it, Wentworth—you nearly drowned yourself in your anxiety to keep her alive. Amy, by the way, can swim like a fish.”

“I think that’s all, Herb,” said Chief Dakin after a while, “except,” he added, “for the unpleasant part.”

They sat in silence while Herbert Wentworth stumbled off through the woods, followed by the comments of the birds and the sad clump of Dakin’s shoes. “Poor Mr. Wentworth,” Amy said at last.

“Poor Mr. Queen,” mourned Ellery. “What on earth am I going to say to those three back at the house, Amy? They’ve taken a pretty bad beating.”

“Oh, I don’t think they’ll mind,” murmured Amy, “after I’ve talked to them. You see, I’ve been thinking . . .”

“What, again?” said Ellery in some dismay.

“No, really. How could I possibly spend more than one-fourth of the income from four million dollars?” Amy threw her head back to the sun. “Isn’t it a beautiful day?”

Ellery took her hand. “Beautiful,” he said.



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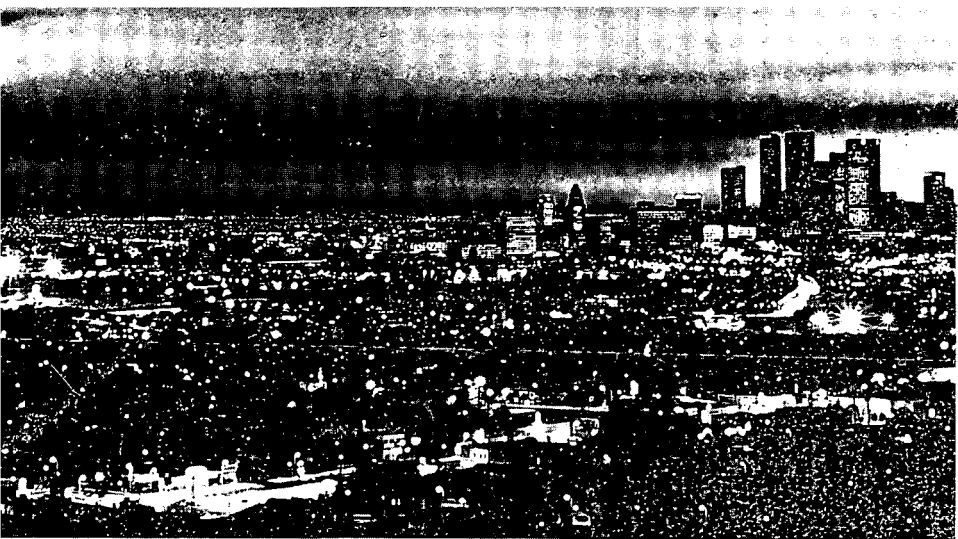
City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_

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